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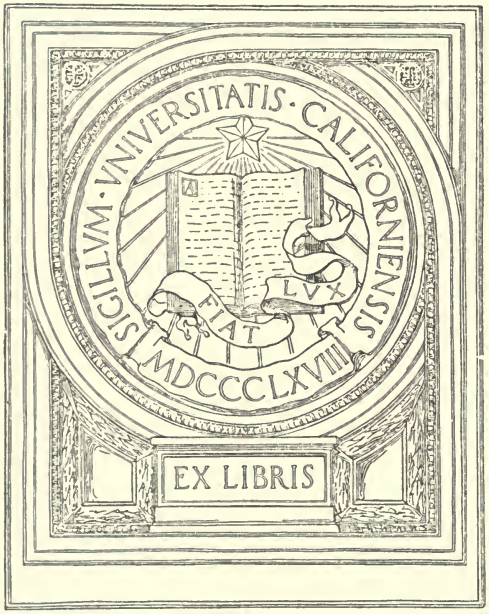
MYSTERY AT CARROL RANCH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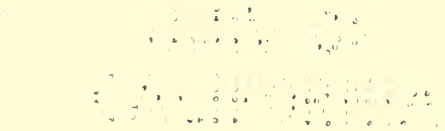
THE MYSTERY AT THE CARROL RANCH

The Mystery at the Carrol Ranch

A Story of the South-West

By Carl Louis Kingsbury



In the sad south-west; in the mystical sunland,
Far from the toil and the turmoil of gain:
Hid in the heart of the only, the one land,
Beloved of the sun and bereft of the rain.
—*Rhymes of the Rockies*

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The Mystery at the Carrol Ranch

By CARL LOUIS KINGSBURY

CHAPTER I.

A Day of Trouble.

BY DINT of incessant care in watering, driving away intrusive hens, and making ferocious but perfectly harmless demonstrations with bits of rocks against whatever dog might chance to come near them, Mrs. Easton had succeeded in growing a screen of morning-glories along the front of the little east porch. She had finished watering the precious crop one morning, and was standing a little back, studying the effect with deep satisfaction, when her eye was attracted to a moving speck on the road beyond the south field.

Despite her sixty odd years, Mrs. Easton's eyes were keen, and she turned from a momentary inspection of the far-off speck with a sniff of contempt.

"Some cowboy ridin' his horse to death, as usual," was her inward conclusion. "Beats all that one of the critters can never go anywhere—no, not as far as the post office after a postage stamp—without ridin' full tilt, as if his time was too precious to be wasted in goin' at a decent gait." And, with a last complacent look at her morning-glories, she turned back into the house.

In the dining-room she found her granddaughter, sixteen-year-old Nora Carrol. Nora had an array of bright-hued bits of print spread out on the table and was busily engaged in matching them. The ultimate outcome of the matching was destined to be a "piece quilt," such as Mrs. Easton, who had instigated the industry, was wont to construct in her own younger days.

Nora glanced up from her occupation as her grandmother entered the room.

"Would you put a red one here, grandma?"

Mrs. Easton, walking over to the table, studied the proposed effect.

"No, I wouldn't. Red and pink don't go well together. Another thing, child, you must be careful to turn in all the edges of the pieces—this way; if you don't, they'll all fray out, and—"

"Hark! Grandma, someone is calling!"

Mrs. Easton, intent on her artistic demonstration, did not catch the remark.

"When I was a girl—" she was beginning, when Nora broke in again.

"There! Don't you hear that, grandma?"

Mrs. Easton paused to listen, and then looked reproachfully at her granddaughter.

"Of course there's someone callin'! How long are you going to sit there and let them holler? Why, when I was your age—" But as Nora had already vanished through the open front door her grandmother, hastily postponing her reminiscences, followed her.

Beside the gate a man, mounted on the lean cow-pony of the Southwest, had halted, and, as Mrs. Easton approached, he was saying to Nora:

"And nothing would do but he must try cutting them out himself. He hadn't more 'n got into the thick of the mix-up when his horse stumbled, and he fell, and was trampled on—"

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"Who fell and was trampled on?" demanded Mrs. Easton, coming up breathless and pale with apprehension.

"Mr. Carrol did. He's hurt some."

"Oh, he isn't hurt badly—don't say that he is hurt badly!" Nora exclaimed, her face white under all its abiding tan.

"Well, you see, we couldn't tell just how bad he is hurt," the range rider admitted, "because he didn't know nothin', and—"

"Do you mean that he was unconscious?" cried Mrs. Easton, in consternation.

"Why—yes—I reckon that's the dictionary word for it. Anyway, he's as limp as a rag baby. The boys are bringin' him home. Big Pete, he rode over Rosita way to fetch the doctor—"

"The doctor!" Mrs. Easton echoed the words with a groan. "Is he as badly hurt as that?"

"One of his legs is broke, sure. We can't tell yet whether they're all broke, or not. He was down, all of a heap, and the cattle trampin' over him; nobody can't tell exactly what did happen, but we 'low that he'll come to his senses again."

The rider, Fred Brown, gathered up his reins, but lingered to explain: "The boys they thought I'd better come on ahead and kind of prepare you-all, like. They'll be close at hand, now, and I must hurry back and meet 'em. They thought, the boys did," he insisted awkwardly, "that it might be easier for you if I come ahead and kind o' broke the news to you."

"Thank you for doing it," said Nora, faintly. Her stricken face bore so piteous a look that Fred was constrained to add, as he again turned his horse's head toward the round-up camp on the Cimarron, where the accident had taken place, "It may be that there ain't more 'n one of his legs broke; we couldn't be sure, you know." He touched his horse and was gone, while Nora and her grandmother reëntered the house; there the bright bits of print scattered about the dining-room table first attracted Mrs. Easton's attention.

"Put away your quiltin' pieces, child. There's no tellin' when you'll get a chance to work on 'em again—maybe never. This is a dretful thing to have happen to us, right at the beginnin' of the round-up season, too! We lost pretty nigh all our crops last year by flood, and nigh all the cattle the year before by winter storms. But, for all that, you won't hear me makin' any complaint. I'm used to sufferin' in silence.

"I did begin to think that maybe we'd get a little forehanded this year, but that hope's all over with now. Dear, dear! what a time it will be for us all! For, if I do say it, James' temper ain't none of the best at any time. You know yourself, Nora—and there's no use in denyin' it—that many's the time when it would be safer, as well as pleasanter, to touch off a bunch of cannon crackers than to cross him.

"Now what are you cryin' about? Look at me—I ain't uttered a word of complaint, nor sha'n't, not if I run my legs off, as I prob'ly shall, waitin' on him."

"Oh, poor father! Grandma, they are bringing him home on a stretcher!"

"What in time would you have them bring him home on? A pitchfork?"

But, despite her protestations, Mrs. Easton's ruddy face grew a shade paler as the vision of her son-in-law returning in this helpless fashion to the home that he had left, well and strong, a few hours before, presented itself to her imagination.

"We'd best get his bed ready," she added, in a subdued voice, while Nora hastily gathered up the last of her pieces.

In the midst of the preparations in the injured man's bedroom, Mrs. Easton suddenly remarked:

"What puzzles me is to know what on earth James was tryin' to cut out cattle for, anyway. That's work for the most skillful cowboys—which your father ain't. Now, you know that as well as I do, Eleanor."

"Fred was telling me, just before you

came out, grandma, that father's horse—he was riding the bay colt—was green and awkward—"

"There, now! Do you reckon that a real, proper-brought-up cowboy would try to cut out cattle from a half-wild herd of a thousand or more, on an unbroken horse? I'm surprised at James. It's past accountin' for, unless he got mad about something, and then he'd undertake anything."

"Fred said—Fred thought—that perhaps he was kind of put out about something," Nora said, hesitatingly, with her eyes on the sheet that she was carefully spreading over the bed.

"Oh, he was put out, was he?"

There was a long pause. Mrs. Easton did not ask what it was that had roused her son-in-law's temper, but she presently observed:

"When a man gets mad he's a good deal like a balky horse: he doesn't feel any hurt. If so be as your pa has come to his senses, and is real mad yet, he won't feel the pain like he would if—"

Just then a sound of trampling feet was heard outside, and Nora cried:

"Here they come, grandma!"

A little procession of horses and footmen had stopped before the gate. The footmen were carrying a rude stretcher, and, as Nora hurried out, she heard the occupant of the stretcher voicing a vigorous protest against being "toted around like a baby!"

"Oh, you're better, aren't you, father?" she exclaimed, as she sprang to his side.

"Better? There ain't anything the matter, as I know of," he replied.

It was plain that he was still somewhat dazed. It was at this instant that Mrs. Easton approached and began at once a voluble rehearsal of the salient points of the disaster as she had heard it.

"Oh, James!" she cried, "what a dretful calamity this is! Are all of your legs broke? Fred, he said one of 'em was, and—"

"I reckon, ma'am," interposed one of the cowboy attendants, "that Mr. Carrol he was just stunned like; he's come to now"—this was self-evident, as Mr. Carrol was already breathing low-toned anathemas against Fred—"and if we was to carry him in against the doctor comes—" He paused inquiringly, and Mrs. Easton answered by leading the way into the house, whither the men followed with their burden, while Nora stayed behind a moment to care for the riderless horse that had brought up the rear of the procession. This horse was the unlucky bay colt. Nora led him to the stable and then ran to the house. The doctor had come during the brief interval of her absence, and she entered the room where her father lay just in time to hear his verdict: "Badly stunned; ankle twisted; a general shaking up. You'll find your bed a comfortable place to stay in for some days to come, Carrol."

After the doctor and the cowboys were gone, James Carrol opened his eyes—he had kept them obstinately closed in order not to look the contempt that he felt for the former's observation as to his finding his bed the most comfortable place to stay in—and looked inquiringly at his daughter, who was sitting quietly by his bedside.

"Did you take care of the colt?"

"Yes, father."

"The colt wasn't to blame; he's green. It wasn't his fault that I had to ask him to do something that he didn't understand; he'd 'a' done it all right if he'd known how."

"What made you—if he didn't know how—" Nora began, and paused.

"Made me try it with him? Because I ain't the one to shirk my work, like some of the rest of my family—there! do put down that cat! It makes me crawl all over to see her rubbing against your face."

As Nora meekly shoved aside the house cat that, with paws around her neck, was purring sympathetically, he went on:

"Where's Rupert? I haven't seen anything of him through all this fuss. Hasn't he got back yet?"

"No, father."

Her father stifled a groan of mingled pain and disappointment.

"I don't know what to do with that boy. He's no good on earth! I tell you, Eleanor, he's no good on earth!" his voice rose angrily, as Nora winced at the words. "If it hadn't been for him, I wouldn't be lying here this way, at the beginning of the round-up season. He'll be the ruin of all of us yet, and you and your grandmother, who are always upholding him, no matter what he does, will live to see it."

"I—I don't understand, father," Nora ventured, timidly, "how Rupert could be to blame for your getting hurt. I thought from what Fred said that it was because the bay colt—"

"Fred's a fool!" her father interrupted, harshly. "Rupert never came at all," he concluded, without taking the trouble to explain in what way his son was to blame for the accident that had befallen him. "And I'd be willing to bet that while I'm held here flat on my back by his carelessness, he's sitting on some rock, or, maybe, lying flat on *his* back, looking up at the sky, or at anything else except the cattle that he's set to watch, and with no more thought of 'em than if they was a herd of buffaloes in the heart of Africa!" This summing up appeared, even to Nora, to be so extremely probable that she made no remark, while her father went on irritably: "And it happens to-day that Cosme, who is of some use, must be gone."

Nora knew that Cosme, the Mexican boy who did odd jobs about the ranch, had gone to Pinos Altos, a long day's drive distant, but when her brother rode away in the early morning, she had not heard his destination mentioned. "Where did Rupert go, father?" she asked.

"Where did Rupert go?" echoed the injured man fretfully. "Who knows where he went? All I know is where I told him to go, and that was to the range on the south slope of the Tefoya Mesa with a bunch of cattle that I am going to herd for Wilson, and then to come on to the round-up on the Cimarron. It isn't far; he could have got the cattle over there and been on hand at the round-up by ten o'clock, easy, but here's the day nigh gone, and not a sign of him yet!"

"It isn't quite so near night as it seems, father; there's a fog coming down from the hills, and that makes it seem later."

"A fog?" Mr. Carrol raised himself on one elbow, the better to peer out of the window at his bedside. "So there is. I noticed this morning that the hills in the north looked kind of hazy. Well, if Rupert has let those cattle get away from him, and the fog settles down as thick as I've seen it in New Mexico before now, ther' ain't enough cowboys in the territory to get them together again until it lets up. A fog!" he repeated anxiously. "I wish your little Jersey was in the corral. I hate to have her out when there's any danger of the cattle straying. He laid himself back on the pillow with a sigh. "Well, there's nothing for it but to wait till Rupert comes, if he comes at all; like enough he'll manage to lose himself as well as the cattle."

"I might go out and be doing the chores; I might feed Snowflake," Nora suggested, rightly deeming that the chore about which her father was most concerned was the care and feeding of the beautiful white mare.

"Maybe you'd better, then there'll be that much done, anyway; and ask your grandmother to make me some coffee, and make it strong."

"I will, father." But the girl paused at the door on her way out to look wistfully back at the figure on the bed. "I wish that I could do something for you," she said at last. "I'm afraid you're suffering more than you will own up to, father."

"I'm suffering some, I'll admit that, child; but it doesn't do any good to dwell on it." He closed his lips with the fortitude of an Indian, resolved to let no sign

escape him, but opened them again immediately to add another item to the long list of Rupert's shortcomings:

"I'm suffering in mind more than in body. If your brother has allowed those steers to get away, I don't see how we are to round them up again; and that's what he has done, of course."

"It may be that he has," Nora admitted, with a sigh that was not all of sympathy for her father, as she rose and quietly left the room.

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CHAPTER II.

Nora Tries to Help Rupert.

"WHERE are you going, now, child?" Mrs. Easton demanded, as her granddaughter passed through the kitchen on her way to the barn.

"Out to feed Snowflake, grandma. Please make father a cup of strong coffee; he thinks he would like it."

"Well, as if I hadn't a realizin' sense of that! There's the water a-bilin' for it already. When you come to my age you'll know, without being told, that hot coffee, next to camphire, is the best thing that a man can drink—or put on his wounds, I mean."

She proceeded to prepare the beverage, and made such good speed that she was soon in the barn at Nora's side.

"I feel worried about Rupert," she confessed, as Nora paused in her occupation to glance inquiringly at her. She pushed back a lock of her rebellious gray hair, as she went on, anxiously:

"What do you s'pose has become of him, this time? Do you think it's anyways probable that the Apaches have got him?"

Despite her own anxiety, Nora laughed. Fourteen years had passed since the very last of the murderous outbreaks of Apache Indians in New Mexico had taken place, and even then the disturbance was several hundred miles distant from the Carrol ranch, but Mrs. Easton had not failed, on all occasions since then, to express her haunting conviction that those ubiquitous red men were directly responsible for it, if any member of her little flock failed to appear promptly at the expected time.

"Well, what do you s'pose has become of him?" she demanded, resenting Nora's laugh.

"Grandma," returned Nora, facing about suddenly, "do you remember the Bible lesson that you read us last Sunday?"

"No, I don't; and if I did, I dunno what it has to do with—"

"But I do, grandma," Nora interrupted eagerly. "It was this: 'If there arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams'—that was part of it, and it made me think of Rupert."

Mrs. Easton shook her head doubtfully. "Rupert's as smart a boy as ever lived," she averred, "but I can't say as I've noticed any signs of his bein' a prophet, and—"

"Ah, but did you ever see such a dreamer of dreams?" declared Nora, triumphantly. "You know, yourself, grandma, that he's as likely as not to have forgotten everything on earth but some cloud he is watching or some wild birds flying over—"

"While you are at home doing his work for him," Mrs. Easton admitted, in a low tone, and added: "I hope he ain't in no worse trouble than watchin' clouds or ant hills—for he's fond of both—this time; he's takin' a good while to go to the Tefoya Mesa."

"Oh, he'll come all right; don't worry, grandma," replied Nora, taking up the pitchfork and beginning to pull hay out of the stack before her.

"Me worry? I guess not! Some folks might let themselves give right away when trouble's piled on to 'em as thick as it has been on to us to-day, but I ain't one of that kind. What I have to bear, I bear, and say

nothin'. Some folks might keep thinkin' of the prairie dog holes that a range rider's horse sometimes steps into and never gets up again, while the rider lays beside him with a broken neck, maybe, or they might be afeard that a boy like Rupert had met up with drunken Mexicans and had got into some dretful quarrel, or that the Apaches had scalped him, but I never think of such things; I make it a rule to never trouble trouble till trouble troubles me. Well, I jest wanted to hearten you up a little about the boy; now I'll go back and give James his coffee."

She hastened back to the house, leaving Nora so effectually "heartened" that the tears came to her eyes as she staggered into the stable, bent under the weight of the heavily loaded pitchfork. After caring for the horses, and stopping before the bay colt's stall to express her very unfavorable opinion of him, she went outside the stable and stood for a moment looking steadfastly toward the south, the direction whence, owing to the exigencies of the trail, Rupert must come if he were returning from the east range of the Tefoya Mesa. The fog, rolling majestically downward from the northern hills, had blotted out all the nearer landscape, but, far to the southwest, a thin stretch of plains, lifted somewhat above the surrounding level, was yet bathed in sunlight. Some cattle were moving restlessly upon it, and, with the fog between and beyond, this sunlit stretch had the effect of a pasture swinging insecurely in midair.

Nora was used to such odd combinations —the effect of sun and plains and fog. What especially interested her was that she at length made out a horseman riding swiftly down the long line of the sky pasture. Even at that distance she instantly recognized Rupert, and understood, moreover, that such riding could only be in an attempt to round up a scattered herd.

Disregarding the amiable whinnies of the white mare, who, from the semi-darkness of her stall, was thrusting a dainty muzzle toward her, Nora ran to the rear of the stable where the bay colt was housed, and, in a kind of breathless, furtive hurry, tossed her father's saddle on his back, led him out by the rear door, which was out of sight from the house, and mounting, dashed away through the thickening fog toward the far sunlit line along which she had seen her brother racing his jaded horse. She could no longer see horse or sky line, but she told herself, as the bay colt bounded onward:

"The cattle have got away from Rupert, and he will never in this world be able to get them together again without help!"

The black and naked mesquite bushes, all alike in their gnarled unloveliness, started from out the mist, only to vanish again on either side in endless procession, as the colt's flying feet spurned the road.

For all sight or sound of other life than her own and the colt's, Nora felt as she might had she entered the heart of a billowy fog ocean, but she kept on at a reckless pace, assured that her brother was somewhere ahead of her, and that he needed help.

Whether she would be able to give the needed help remained to be seen, but the gait at which she kept the bay colt was none the slower for that. To her loyal heart there was but the one patent fact: Rupert needed help, and there was no one save her to render it.

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CHAPTER III.

What Rupert was Doing.

RUPERT, for whose return father and daughter watched, each in a different spirit, but with equal anxiety, was having sufficient trouble of his own.

In the early morning he had left home filled with hope and good intentions, among which might be reckoned a firm determination to carry out to the letter the directions that his father had given him in regard to the work for the day, and to allow no be-

traying side issues to divert his attention from the matter immediately in hand.

But Rupert was always swayed by circumstances, and there was, for him, an endless chain of interesting circumstances connected with the cattle drive. His father had been right in saying that Rupert could have easily reached the round-up on the Cimarron by ten o'clock, after leaving the herd of steers on their allotted range, had he attended strictly to business; but strict attention to business (as he understood the word) and Rupert were utter strangers.

So much so that before nightfall of that same day Rupert was driven nearly desperate by the recollection of the things that he ought to have done, and had left undone, in order, as it now seemed to him, that he might have the more time to do the things that he ought not to.

Rupert loved the great, wild plains. They were to him as the open pages of a book spread out for his entertainment. Each succeeding day, with its differing atmospheric effects, was as the turning of a new page in the great book whose leaves —the fixed, unalterable, melancholy, gray plains—were always the same, but whose illustrations varied with every passing hour—almost, indeed, with every passing minute, as cloud shadows, flying over the waste of gray, caught his eye and drew it upward to the cloud itself floating in a waste of blue. The flight of an eagle, the wavering line of some far-off mirage, or, in summer, the dizzying shimmer of heat waves undulating endlessly over the scorching solitudes, would hold him spell-bound and speechless for minutes at a time, and what mischief might not a half-wild, intractable herd of cattle get into in those minutes?

Cosme, the Mexican helper, had started at dawn with the work team and wagon for Pinos Altos to purchase supplies, but as Rupert, with his bunch of steers well in hand, rode up the long slope of the Tefoya Mesa, three miles east of the ranch house, he caught a vanishing glimpse of Cosme and the outfit going at good speed, not on the road that wound like a constantly narrowing white ribbon toward Pinos Altos, but well beyond that road and traveling without apparent aim, straight over the unbroken plains toward the north. Pinos Altos lay due east, thirty miles away. Halting his pony, Rupert sat gazing after the disappearing wagon in constantly increasing amazement. There could be no doubt as to its being his father's team and wagon. Rupert's vision was as keen as a hawk's, and it is a poor eye that cannot locate and classify any object of reasonable size at an almost unbelievable distance in the clear air of the Great Plains country.

"Now what do you reckon that little rascal is going off that way for?" Rupert suddenly questioned his cow-pony, Vidette. As Vidette gave no other reply than an impatient shake of her head, Rupert, who was much in the habit of talking to his stanch little mount, continued decisively: "Well, whatever it is, you can just make up your mind that it's for no good."

He watched the outfit for a few minutes longer, then glanced around at the cattle that, taking advantage of his momentary inattention, had already stopped, spread out, and gone to grazing. Whatever might be said of Rupert's discretion, he was not altogether lacking in discrimination. His quick, inquiring glance told him that the grass was good, and he knew that the steers, fifty in number, having been in the corral without food since the previous evening, must be very hungry. It seemed to him that they were safe to remain where they were, or, at least, near by, for some hours, and it would take but a few minutes for him to overhaul Cosme and find out what the Mexican was doing; then there would be ample time yet left for him to make the round-up camp, without rushing the steers to their destination, either.

"Vidette, my girl, we'll just step along and see what Master Cosme is trailing

after," he informed the pony, as he whirled her about and set off at a good pace, straight after the lessening object that was still traveling steadily northward, well beyond the Pinos Altos road. The distance between the point where Rupert had first sighted Cosme and himself was, as he estimated it, about four miles. It would be a mere playspell for fleet-footed Vidette to make the four miles and back again within an hour, he reckoned, as he blithely took up the trail, leaving the steers unguarded, it is true, but also wholly oblivious to his departure, and of everything else save eating. As it turned out, however, appearances were deceitful in this case, as in so many others.

In some of his too-frequent moments of exasperation with his only son, Mr. Carrol was wont to say that Rupert was an industrous lad, in one way, inasmuch as he was always busy, either in getting into a scrape or in getting out of one. He was certainly justifying the first part of his father's statement when he turned his back on his charges and sent his pony racing down the long slope of the Tefoya Mesa in pursuit of the young Mexican. His estimate of the time that it would take to overhaul the Mexican was correct, as far as it went, but, unfortunately, it did not go far enough, for he failed to take into account the fact that the outfit was traveling, too. He had unwittingly embarked on the proverbially long, stern chase. More than that, when Cosme, happening to glance back, saw him coming, he sprang up in the wagon, and, seizing the long whip, lashed the straining horses into a furious gallop. This unexpected move filled Rupert with such blinding fury that he forgot everything but the pursuit. He was sure that the Mexican had instantly recognized by whom he was followed, and was bent on escaping him.

Suddenly Vidette, whose acquaintance with the spur had hitherto been of the slightest, felt a stinging, goading prick in her side; she sprang forward as if all the Furies were at her heels. The little mare was noted throughout the cattle country for her phenomenal bursts of speed, and this one took her, in an incredibly short space, within hailing distance of the occupant of the wagon drawn by the lumbering, panting work horses.

Rupert stood up in his stirrups.

"You, Cosme, stop!" he shouted, his face white with rage, while he shook his clinched fist menacingly at the reckless driver. "Stop, I say! Do you want to kill those horses?"

For reply Cosme again laid the lash over the backs of the straining bays. But they were built for heavy draft work, and not for speed; they were already doing their best, and, whip as he might, Cosme could get no more than that from them, while Rupert's horse was still fresh. Paying no further attention to the Mexican, Rupert now bent all his energies to trying to stop the horses. It took but an instant to pass them; that done he faced his pony about squarely in their path, and so near that, as Vidette came to a full stop, the end of the wagon tongue grazed her side. She held her ground, and, despite the long, stinging lash that the Mexican plied frantically about their heads, the work horses would not, as he tried to make them, run down their stable companion. They swerved, rearing and backing, threatening momentarily to overturn the wagon.

In the midst of the mêlee, Cosme, seeing the uselessness of this kind of resistance, suddenly abandoned the whip and tried to regain control of the horses by turning them to one side, obedient to the pull on the lines, the frightened creatures came instantly to their feet and started forward. Rupert, silent and rigid as a statue, stood up in his stirrups until the forward end of the wagon-box was within two feet of Vidette's shoulders, then with a spring, catlike in its unexpectedness and agility, he had freed his feet from the stirrups and was standing on the seat of the saddle.

"You, Cosmo, stop!" Rupert shouted.

Another spring, and he was in the wagon with his hand on the Mexican's throat.

"Say—say—now, you—you unutterable greaser—tell me what you mean by this!"

As Cosme made no other reply than to grasp and struggle, the muscular young hand tightened its grip on his throat.

"Are you going to tell me?" Rupert demanded fiercely, at the same time shaking his victim as a cat shakes a mouse. Cosme, strangling, at length got both of his hands clasped around the wrist of the hand that was slowly but surely choking the life out of him, and pulled at it frantically, until Rupert, suddenly aware of what he was doing, relaxed the strangling pressure of his fingers.

"You'd better get under way and tell me what you're up to," he advised, as Cosme gaspingly tried to recover his breath.

"Me, how was it I could tell yo' anything w'en yo' was chokin' me to death?" the Mexican sputtered, in an aggrieved tone.

"It's a job I'm going to finish, right now, unless you tell me."

"Me—I—" Cosme began, and stopped. Rupert's efficient right hand was at his side, and he was standing threateningly over the Mexican. The horses had been whipped and harried into such a state of terror that any word, sound or movement would startle them. With a yell Cosme suddenly shied his broad-brimmed, pointed hat at their heads; they sprang forward, jerking Rupert—as Cosme had instantly divined would be the result—off his feet and down into the wagon-box, where he sprawled at length. He was not lying, however, exactly as Cosme had anticipated he would, for if the young Mexican was quick, the young American was quicker. Cosme found himself in the unfortunate predicament of the soldier—hoist with his own petard. He had succeeded, it was true, in jerking Rupert off his feet, but as he fell, his clutch at Cosme brought that individual down with, and under, him. The Mexican, taken completely at a disadvantage, was powerless to help himself. Rupert, with his right hand again in action on the sinewy brown throat, planted one knee on Cosme's chest, and with his free hand gathered in the lines that were in imminent danger of slipping beyond his reach. Holding the gasping Mexican down steadily, he spoke soothingly to the horses.

"Whoa, boys! Whoa, Ned! Whoa, Frank! Come, now, come, that's good boys! Come!" Accustomed to his voice, and to associate only gentle treatment with it, the horses, frightened though they were, instantly responded.

They were standing quietly, and the lines were wound securely around the brake handle, when Rupert again turned his attention to the Mexican.

Cosme, who had fully realized the futility of resistance under the circumstances, had not suffered so much as during his previous brief experience of strangulation.

"Well?" said Rupert, looking down into the shifty black eyes that evaded his own, "out with it!"

"I ain't got nothin' to tell, me," returned Cosme, sullenly. "It was w'at you gringos call a joke, my running away from you—jus' a joke. Now yo' let me up, an' I go straight to Pinos Altos."

"No, you won't; you'll never go straight anywhere—not as long as you're the fellow you are—but I'll tell you what I'm going to do. While the horses are getting over their scare, I'm going to put in the time in giving you a dose of the same medicine you've been giving them. Get out—get down to the ground. I'm going to lick you, good and plenty."

As Cosme did not instantly respond to this invitation, Rupert assisted him by jerking him summarily out of the wagon.

When both were on the ground, Rupert proceeded to make good his promise, until Cosme, whimpering, presently entreated:

"Le' me go! Le' me go! Oh, le' me go! I tell yo' true, now!"

"See that you do; if you tell me any lies, I'll find it out, and I'll give you a worse dose than this one ever thought of being. Where were you headed for?"

"For the witch woman's cave, on Sulphur Butte," was the sullen reply.

The Sulphur Butte, so called because of its color, loomed darkly against the sky line a dozen miles away, and, as Rupert looked toward it, he dimly recalled the tradition among the Mexicans of a very ancient, very wise, very avaricious old woman who dwelt, keeping mystic state, somewhere amid its shadows. Declining to inquire into the motives that prompted Cosme to make such a visit, or to attempt making it, Rupert went on:

"How about your trip to Pinos Altos for supplies? You were headed full forty miles out of your way. Did you intend to come back to-morrow?"

"Me? No; the boss he would know if the horses they was use' too hard. I was goin' say the wagon she break down; have to lay over on road one day."

Cosme, dust-begrimed, battered, with blood trickling down from a slight cut where Rupert's knuckles had visited his cheek too savagely, was, for the nonce, beaten. It was patent that he was telling the truth.

"Get into the wagon and drive back to the Pinos Altos road, and see that you keep it," Rupert ordered, sternly.

The Mexican climbed into the wagon, and from that vantage turned appealingly to the young American:

"Was yo' goin' le' on, back at ranch, w'at it was I was tryin' do?" he asked.

"Is that any of your business?"

"Yes. Me, I don't care. My fadder he no good to me; I ain't got no other place but ranch for go to. If you was tell the boss, me, I might jus' as well be all dead now as any time."

"Set your mind at rest on that score, you coward. I'm no telltale."

Cosme, content with this—which he knew to be strictly true—started the team, and Rupert walked back to where Vidette stood waiting, mounted, and himself started back toward the herd that he expected to find still grazing where he had left them.

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CHAPTER IV.

An Invitation to a Dance.

THE cattle had almost immediately discovered the absence of the herder, and not caring to penetrate into a country that was new to them, began grazing in the direction of their old range. With a dawning sense of liberty, haste grew upon them, and when, two full hours after his encounter with Cosme, Rupert returned, it was to find himself alone on the mesa, with no herd in sight; moreover, a glance at the sun told him that it was quite ten o'clock, and his father would be expecting him at the round-up camp. His heart sank as he realized what the encounter with Cosme might cost him—the more that, no matter what came, he was not one to make explanations or excuses that could, by any stretch of ingenuity, be construed into clearing his own record at the expense of another.

By what perverted idea of moral obligation Rupert was guided in this matter of not disclosing the guilt of another, especially when his father was fully entitled to know of that guilt, it would be hard to say. In justice to his father he should have tried to enlighten him as to the Mexican's true character, and in common kindness to the dumb animals placed in Cosme's charge, he was also in duty bound to tell what he knew, but he took a certain savage pride in sticking to the letter of his declaration when he had informed the Mexican that he "was no tell-tale."

For a long time after reaching the deserted grazing ground, Rupert stood up in his stirrups and bent his keen glances far and near in search of the missing cattle.

He was well enough versed in the ways of herds to know that they had undoubtedly headed for their old range, a long distance in the opposite direction from the one that he wished them to take. He was soon upon their trail, and a few miles brought him up with them; they were trotting steadily toward the old range, and it soon became evident that they had no intention of abandoning their purpose of reaching it.

It was long before Rupert was able to turn them on the back track, and that he did so at all spoke volumes for his perseverance and the good qualities of his horse. Back and forth, to and fro, now this way, now that, raced the pony and his young rider, minute after minute, hour after hour, until, late in the afternoon, the sullen brutes were as far on the right track again as the sky pasture down which Nora had seen her brother's pony galloping. Having got them so far, the tired and hungry boy realized that with night coming on he could do no more without help. It was cold, too, and growing colder. He checked the faithful little bronco, whose heaving sides were wet with foam, and looked desolately off in the direction of home; there was nothing to be seen there now but an obscuring ocean of fog. He was very hungry. Suppose he rode home, got something to eat and a warm coat, and came back to keep guard over the cattle all night? He thought them tired enough to stay where they were if they were watched, but it wrung his heart to think of putting this extra work upon the pony, who was already trembling with fatigue.

"Maybe father 'll let me take Snowflake, if he's got the bay colt used up, as he probably has," thought Rupert, with very small hope indeed that the valuable white mare would be entrusted to him through the trying hours of an all-night guard.

"I'm afraid you'll have to bring me back if I do go, Vidette," he said aloud, at last; "and so I won't go." The cattle, although seemingly quiet, were still alertly ready to make a break for freedom at any unguarded instant, and Rupert began slowly circling round them. This is the cowboy's usual hint to his charges that they may settle down where they are. A few of them took the hint. The pony was very tired and walked with lagging footsteps. In the silence, broken only by her slow footfall, Rupert had scarcely time to become aware of a sound of trampling hoofs, when three horsemen burst into view, much as though they had been mysteriously projected on a canvas of fog. Rupert recognized them joyfully as herders from the 7-H Ranch from over on the Vermijo.

"Where you goin'?" demanded the foremost, as they halted beside him.

Rupert candidly explained what had befallen him. These men had not heard, any more than had Rupert himself, of the accident that his father had suffered, but they were none the less cordial and sympathetic. One remembered that he had some lunch in his saddle pocket, and an instant afterward Rupert was sampling it with relish.

Suddenly one of their number exclaimed, "Boys, I'll tell you what let's do: we'll help this kid run this bunch of steers into the old Valdez corral. It ain't more 'n half a mile or so out of our way; then he can start 'em out again to-morrow and chase 'em all day if he wants to."

"I reckon I've had chasing enough to do me for a day or two," answered Rupert. "But that's a mighty good plan of yours, and I'll be everlastingly obliged to you all if you'll help me to carry it out."

"Oh, that's all right; we won't leave you now till you're out of this scrape," returned the spokesman of the little party. "We was kind of hopin' to meet up with you, anyway," he went on. "There's goin' to be a dance at the 7-H to-morrow night, and we'd like first-rate to have you come. De Vargas is goin' to play."

"De Vargas! Is he?" A thrill seemed to go through Rupert's veins; he lifted his eyes to the bronzed face of his companion.

"Yes; them Perrez folks are kin to him in some way, and he's there on a visit now. It'll be a big thing to have him to play, won't it?"

"I should say so!" replied Rupert, slowly. The fame of the Mexican violinist had penetrated even beyond the boundaries of his far Southwestern home. Rupert had already forgotten that he was hungry; the slice of bread that he had been eating fell unnoticed from his hand. "I'd like to go," he said, as they urged the unwilling cattle slowly forward, "but I don't know as I can; I will if I can."

"All right. We'll keep a place for you," was the gay response.

A herd of tame sheep could not have been more submissive than was this same rebellious herd when they found four horsemen pitted against them instead of one; the wildest among them only ventured to snort and shy a little when, from out the mist in front, a girl, mounted on a bay colt, her hair streaming behind her, and her face pale with anxiety, burst suddenly upon them. Rupert was the first to discover what had startled them. "Hello, Nora! How came you here?" he called, eagerly.

"I saw you, and I came to help."

"You've got mighty good eyes, and I'd have been glad enough of your help if someone else hadn't got in ahead of you. This is my sister, Nora Carrol," he introduced her to the cowboy who chanced to be nearest.

The cowboy—whose name Rupert had forgotten, if he ever knew—snatched off his wide-brimmed hat with a sweeping obeisance. It struck him, in the hasty half-glance that the exigencies of the case permitted, that Carrol had more than one reason for feeling proud of a sister like that.

The refractory steers were safely corraled at last, and the three friendly cowboys bade brother and sister a cordial good-night.

"We-all will watch out for you, sure, to-morrow night," one called back, cheerfully, "and if you don't come we-all will serenade you with cornstalk fiddles."

As their breezy laughter floated back to them through the shrouding mist, Nora was conscious of feeling a pang of envy for their light spirits. Their presence had kept at bay for the moment the heavy sense of trouble that now enveloped her again as she turned to give Rupert further details of their father's accident, and now, with more leisure to think the matter over than when she had first told him, the same idea occurred to Rupert that had occurred to his grandmother: "I don't see why father tried to do such work; he never did before."

"He was kind of put out, Fred said," Nora explained, hesitatingly.

Rupert's face flushed. Certain faint lines, that the molding hand of Time might eventually chisel into the semblance of a hard mask, deepened about his sensitive lips.

"That means that he manages to put the blame for the accident on me," he said, bitterly. "I reckon he got angry because I didn't show up the minute he expected me, and so just rushed into anything that came along, out of spite."

Nora's bent head drooped yet lower.

"You are speaking of father, Rupert," she said, sadly.

Rupert's only reply was an angry exclamation and the advice, proffered in no gentle tone:

"Don't try to be a saint; you'll make a botch of it if you do."

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CHAPTER V.

Father and Son.

AS BROTHER and sister neared the ranch house on the evening of the belated round-up, Rupert relapsed into gloomy silence, his thoughts dwelling apprehensively, yet resentfully, on what his father might be expected to say when he

learned the outcome of Rupert's attempt to drive their neighbor's cattle to a new range.

"As Patrick Henry says," he burst out suddenly, "'The only lamp by which my feet are guided is the lamp of experience,' and judging by my experience in the past, I know that father will be red hot at me—I wish that he wouldn't. If he only knew what Cos—" He checked himself as the Mexican's name almost slipped from his lips, and completed the sentence adroitly: "co'se, I have taken—"

"'Co'se'!" Nora's nose uptilted in dissatisfaction. "I wish, Rupert, that you wouldn't affect that Southern cowboy pronunciation. I don't see, just because we happen to be—well, marooned in this wild country, why we can't at least keep our language pure."

"Marooned in this wild country." Rupert musingly repeated the sentiment that had especially claimed his attention, and then went on with the engaging smile that won him friends wherever he went:

"When one comes to reckon it all up, I don't know who can blame father for getting mad; he has reason enough, and he'll do it, all right."

His face clouded again as he continued: "It does seem to me, Nora, that I don't more than have time to crawl out of one scrape before I'm head over heels into another; and, without exception, the latest scrape is worse than the one that went before it."

"It is too bad," Nora said, sympathetically. Being an essentially truthful character she did not attempt to refute the statement. She sighed as she added, with apparent irrelevance: "The doctor said that father ought not to be excited in any way; that he ought to be kept quiet."

"Well, say, then, suppose for his own sake that we don't mention this latest exploit at all? Let him think that I got the cattle over to the range all right, but that I had trouble with them—which was why I was late for the round-up. I had the trouble—that's no dream—but he'd be surprised to learn how much more trouble I had with another kind of cattle—" Rupert checked himself quickly. He was wont to confide everything to Nora.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Nothing. In the morning I'll start out early and get the bunch to the far side of the mesa. There'll be no more harm done than has been done already, and, since he's in a nervous condition, anyway, he need know nothing about it."

"Why—don't you think—wouldn't that be deceiving him?" Nora queried doubtfully. She was a year younger than Rupert, and ready in all things to admit his superiority—only, her nature was of the frankest, and she did not take at all naturally to evasions.

"No, it wouldn't; it would be simply keeping back a little of the truth for his good."

"Suppose you have trouble again tomorrow—or that we have, for I'm going with you—we'd be sorry, then, that we hadn't told him all about it this time."

Rupert stifled a sigh of relief as Nora made the announcement that she intended to accompany him next day, and responded perversely: "We're not likely to have any trouble; I shouldn't have had any to-day, if it hadn't been for Cosme—confound him!"

As she had previously wondered how Rupert could be to blame for her father's accident, Nora now wondered how Cosme could be held accountable for Rupert's negligence; between the two peppery tempers, however, the girl had learned a discretion beyond her years. Her task now, as always, was to prevent collision, if possible, so she held her peace, and Rupert, who was tired, hungry and cross, burst out:

"I reckon I'm as sorry as anyone that father is hurt; I don't want to excite and make him worse. But, of course, if you feel like telling, you're going to do it. You don't care how much trouble you make me.

Care! I believe you like to do it, just so you get your own skirts clear."

"Rupert, do you think father would have approved of my taking this colt and riding out to help you, if he had known of it?" Nora asked, in a broken voice.

This reminder of a risk, and possible danger, encountered for his sake, shamed the boy, but the suspicion of tears in the broken voice also irritated him.

"Oh, that's right! Now cry!" he exclaimed bitterly. "A fellow can't speak to you without you begin crying."

A few yards more, passed over in silence, brought them to the stable door, in which a lighted lantern was hanging.

"Grandma has been watching for us," Nora said, as she drew rein in the little circle of light that it threw upon the encroaching fog. Before she could slip from the bay colt's back, Rupert, with Vidette's bridle over his arm, was at her side.

"Let me help you down," he said, gently, holding up his arms. As Nora's feet touched the ground he laid his face against her cheek for an instant. "Don't be mad at me, Nora," he whispered. "You and grandma are awful good and I'm awful mean."

Nora's eyelashes were still wet as she answered, with a little gurgling laugh, "I know you are, but I'm not mad."

"You think I ought to tell, though?" Rupert insisted, with an eager glance into her face.

"I won't tell. I'll promise that, Rupert, for I know that you'll do what's right about it, without any help of mine."

"Don't be too sure of that," returned Rupert, grimly.

Leaving him to care for the horses, she went on into the house.

Mrs. Easton had shrewdly surmised what had become of her as soon as she missed Nora that evening. Her surmises had become certainties as soon as she hastened out to the barn and found the bay colt missing also. Now she greeted her granddaughter's entrance with a low-toned inquiry:

"Did you find Rupert?"

Nora nodded silently, and her grandmother, with the wisdom that ripens best under gray hairs, asked no more, though burning with curiosity on the subject.

"I dunno's you'll believe me," she went on, in her usual tone, as she passed from the living-room into the kitchen, whence Mr. Carrol's bedroom opened, "when I tell you that that black hen has hatched out fourteen chicks from thirteen eggs; thirteen eggs was just what I give her, and when I went out to the barn to look at her a spell ago, I could skurce believe my eyes. Fourteen chicks! Of course, one of the eggs was a double-yelked one."

Mr. Carrol, by the doctor's directions, was well under the influence of opiates, but he roused up enough to murmur drowsily in answer to this statement: "Or else some other hen laid in the nest while she was sitting. Has Rupert got back?"

"Rupert? Oh, yes, he's back; he's just finishing up 'round the stable."

"Very well; send him to me as soon as he comes in."

Out at the stable, as he went about his evening chores, Rupert was having a hard wrestle with his conscience. In vain he tried to convince himself that it would be better, all round, for him to gloss over the day's proceedings, leaving the exact truth untold, but there was Nora—Nora, who always seemed as far above deceit or prevarication as the stars were above the earth, and to whom obedience to their father was a kind of religion, yet who had braved his displeasure, as well as taken a deadly risk, in mounting a half-broken colt, wholly unused to the fluttering skirts of a girl rider, to come to his—Rupert's—aid. Nora was no coward, if she was a girl. It seemed to him, suddenly, hardly fair that Nora's brother should be guilty of a sneaking or cowardly act, either—hardly fair to her.

"The reason that I don't want to tell the truth is because I'm afraid to—just afraid of father's tongue, that's all. 'It biteth like an adder, it stingeth like a serpent,'" thought the boy, lingering in the solitude of the barn to review the situation, and getting a good deal mixed in the practical application of his Scriptural lore. "I reckon I'm several kinds of a coward," the boy continued in his solitary musing; "but I would hate to have Nora blamed, too, as she would be, if father finds out that she knows something that she isn't willing to tell him, and the fault all mine!" Which was Rupert's first realization of the great truth that one may not be mean, or cowardly, or selfish, to himself alone, but that the result of the thing that he is, or does, will surely affect in some degree all of those with whom his life is intimately associated.

On a shelf in Vidette's stall lay an oddly-shaped, oblong case of dark wood. Tired, hungry, cold, with a weight of trouble on his young heart, a compassionate yearning over the father whom he yet dreaded to face, a longing to comfort and to be comforted, Rupert yet waited, after the chores were all done, before he sought the sheltering warmth of the house, to hold up the lantern and look at it—only at the case that covered his treasure. Once he stretched out his hand and stroked the insensate wood tenderly. One saw, then, that the boy's long, slender, flexible fingers were those of the born musician. "Father says that my playing sets his teeth on edge," he murmured, half aloud. "I wonder if he would send De Vargas out to the barn to play!"

With a farewell glance to see that all was snug for the night, and a smile for the white mare, who, not finding her ration of alfalfa hay exactly to her taste, was tossing it daintily on the floor, bit by bit, Rupert took the lantern and went out, locking the door after himself with the key that Nora had found time to bring him.

Supper was on the table when Rupert entered the kitchen, and his grandmother said, "You'd better set right down and eat, Rupert. Your pa he's had his supper—he wouldn't eat nothin' but a cup of coffee—and I guess he's dozin' now."

"How is he?" Rupert asked, as he proceeded to wash his face and hands at the sink near the door.

"He's as comfortable as can be expected, and he's uncommon quiet; he's skurcely spoke since the doctor left."

This was not at all what Rupert had expected; he had thought that the wounded man would be fuming with impatience, and the reverse picture conjured up by his grandmother's words was so awe-inspiring that for the first time he completely lost sight of his own discomfiture. His ablutions finished, and his dark hair neatly brushed, he said, softly, "I reckon I'll just tiptoe in and take a look at him, grandma; if he's asleep I won't disturb him."

Mr. Carrol was not asleep; he opened his eyes as his ears caught the boy's faint footfall, and looked at him steadily; all the pain and disappointment of the day just past swept over him again in a wave of angry recollection as the boy's troubled gaze met his. He raised himself upon his elbow, regardless of the pain the movement cost, and glared at his son in white wrath. "So you've got around at last, have you? Well, you can look at me and see a part of your day's work; now tell me about the rest of it."

"There's nothing to tell," returned Rupert, rebelliously, all the pity that he had felt for his father hardening into defiance.

"Nothing to tell!" echoed the other, in fury. "Give an account of yourself, sir, or, I swear, I'll set Cosme to dog your footsteps after this. I'll have an account of you from someone whom I can trust."

"I should say—not that I'm called on to make observations," remarked Mrs. Easton, who had followed Rupert into the room,

"that that was about as unfeelin' a speech as any parent could get off to any child; let alone gettin' it off to an only son, and a good one."

"Never mind, grandma; if father feels like setting his hired boy—and a greaser at that—to keep watch of me, I'll make it a point to see that he earns his wages. I'll give him something to do," said Rupert.

"You ungrateful serpent! Have you no sense of shame, no remorse for what you have done, when you see me lying here as the result of your criminal folly?" roared the invalid.

"That sounds like as if you might have read it out of a book, James," interposed Mrs. Easton, amiably; "and if you did, you know yourself that there ain't much use in belaborin' a serpent, 'count of its bein' ungrateful. A serpent, accordin' to my knowledge of natural history, is ungrateful because it's like them dogs in that hymn of Mr. Wattses—you remember about that hymn: 'Let dogs delight to bark and bite, for 'tis their nature to'—that's the way it runs," the old lady concluded, with a countenance of really cherubic innocence.

Racked with pain, and secretly very much ashamed of his outburst, Mr. Carrol sank back upon his pillow. "You may as well go," he said, coldly, to Rupert.

"Not until I have told you why I came so late, father," Rupert said, approaching the bed again and looking wistfully at his father.

"Go on, then," was the answer.

The lad recited the history of the day's proceedings, or, it should be said, as much of the day's proceedings as it seemed to him at all advisable to relate. In making the suppressions that he did, he was actuated solely by a desire to do the right and honorable thing by all concerned, and, while under no illusions in regard to sparing Cosme—who deserved no consideration whatever—he yet had a mistaken, fanciful idea that it would not be honorable in him to tell tales, even on one who had proved himself so unworthy. The much less important matter of failing to mention Nora's part in the day's work he passed over with no twinges of conscience, assured that Nora herself would speak of it.

When Rupert's story was ended, Mr. Carrol lay for a long minute silently reviewing in his mind all of its points; then he said, with a good deal less temper than might have been expected, even with a faint suggestion of apology in his tones:

"I see that you've had a hard day. So have I. I reckon it makes me unreasonable. Of course, you were not to blame for my making a fool of myself by trying to cut out cattle with a green colt. I can take all the glory for that myself."

"Father," said Nora, quickly, as Mr. Carrol relapsed into silence, "I took the bay colt and went out to help Rupert."

"Did you? It was a reckless thing to do—terribly reckless—but it seems there was no harm done."

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CHAPTER VI.

A Violin Solo.

"COME, now, Rupert, set right down and eat your supper," Mrs. Easton again urged, as the trio filed into the kitchen.

"I'm not hungry. I don't want any supper," Rupert declared, and, snatching up his cap, walked to the outer door, closing it sharply as he strode out into the darkness of the moonless night.

Mrs. Easton stared at the closed door for an instant, then, dropping into a chair, buried her face in the folds of her apron.

"Without was wailin', and darkness, and gnashin' of teeth!" she murmured.

"Oh, grandma, grandma, don't cry! *Don't* cry!" Nora implored, putting an arm around the shaking shoulders. "Oh, grandma, I've heard you say, lots of times, that if we only trust—"

"*Only* trust!" Mrs. Easton echoed the word with concentrated bitterness. "That's just it, exactly! The idea of our settin' 'round, like a couple of stoughton bottles, *only* trusting, while them two-edged swords are hackin' away at each other's hearts!"

Nora had nothing to say to this. All the little anchors and wise saws as to doing one's duty, regardless of consequences, seemed suddenly to have failed both her and her grandmother in their time of need.

Indeed, it was a distinct shock to discover that her grandmother had, in effect, scornfully repudiated her own philosophy when it came to making a personal application of it.

Nora sat down at the table, propped her chin on her folded hands, and set herself soberly to studying out, if it could be done, some solution of the growing difficulty between father and son. That it was a growing difficulty it was useless to deny, to herself, at least.

With her grave eyes fixed upon the yellow flame of the kerosene lamp, she seemed looking beyond the homely domestic convenience—beyond, and into a future where Rupert, if this trouble continued unchecked, wandered alone—alone—into what far, unhappy countries.

Young as she was, she yet saw, with a solemn and prophetic understanding of what it all meant, a lonely, sensitive, impulsive and stubborn boy, drifting farther and farther away from home and all restraining ties, into what outer darkness who could tell? A blow could not have hurt her so much as did her father's reckless threat of setting Cosme to dog Rupert's footsteps. "As if he expected to find Rupert doing something mean!" she thought, indignantly. But repentance instantly followed what seemed a disloyal thought toward her father. "It was pain that made him say it—just the pain," she said, unconsciously speaking aloud.

"Yes," returned her grandmother, misunderstanding her, "it's a dretful painful thing to have happen." She remained behind the eclipse of the gingham apron for a moment longer, and then came out to add: "But I suppose it'll blow over; such things most generally do. It would be easier to bear while it's blowin' over if we could feel sure that it wouldn't all blow up again. Still," she continued, pinning her faith once more to one of her two great sheet anchors, "what does Mr. Watts say? 'I would not live alway; I ask not to stay, where storm after storm broodeth dark o'er the way.' You see, these things are ordained for our good in this way—every flare-up makes us the more willin' to quit this earthly scene and go where flare-ups are no more."

"You mean, grandma, that these troubles are for our good, don't you? Just you and me? But how about father and Rupert?"

"I didn't say anything about them, Eleanor. How can I tell just what the Lord is up to? One thing I am afraid of—I'm dretfully afraid of it, child."

The gingham apron was brought into requisition again as she went on: "I'm afraid that the Lord ain't got Rupert in the holler of his hand, so to say, as he has you. Why, you'd be safe to do the right thing if you was set down in the midst of a band of howlin' savages. Why, even if they wanted to make soup of you," the old lady continued in forceful illustration, "you'd manage to find time to tell 'em the best way to do it, 'cordin' to your lights, and to help 'em every way you could; but Rupert he'd resent it."

"I daresay he would," Nora admitted, her distress visibly lightened as this picture presented itself vividly before her imagination. "But that isn't because I'm any better than he is, or—"

"Well, for the land's sakes, Eleanor Carrol! Who has ever so much as intimated that you are any better?"

"No one, grandma. I was only going to say that it's because I'm more stupid."

"Oh, I don't know about that. You are

different; and then he's a boy." After a little silence, during which she seemed to be reflecting profoundly, Mrs. Easton said:

"When I was a girl, my father he used to put up a barrel of cider every year to make vinegar; after a while the cider would get to fermentin', and father—he had a purty good-sized bump of curiosity—he was always wantin' to know just how it was a-doin' inside the barrel. He'd go down cellar, now and again, and loosen the bung, a-tryin' to judge of the contents by the way the stuff was actin'. Sometimes he'd no sooner get the bung loosened than it would shoot out and—sizz, fizz, spatter! the cider would come pourin' out, a-wettin' him all up and wastin' more 'n half of it, like's not, before he could get control of it again; while if he'd jest let it alone, it would 'a' gone on in its own way, as nature ordained, and 'a' made good, wholesome cider vinegar. Now, Nora, it does 'pear to me, sometimes, that that is the way it is with your father and Rupert. Rupert he's the barrel, and James can't be easy; he can't rest and let the barrel sizz it out in its own way, but he must be a-loosenin' the bung and makin' a heap of trouble for himself and the barrel. Well, there," she concluded, rising abruptly, "I might jest about as well not got any supper at all; none of us has et a mouthful." She began putting away the untasted food, while Nora, whose heart was sore for her brother, slipped quietly out of the door into the night.

Meantime Mr. Carrol was suffering from another sort of pain than that caused by his injuries; he had heard Rupert's reply to his grandmother's entreaty, and, subsequently, the opening and closing of the outer door; he even heard his mother-in-law's parable of the cider barrel, and acknowledged its applicability to himself with a grim sense of justice.

"Reckon maybe Rupert never was meant for a cowboy, not even for a little while, as I want him to be," he told himself, in late recognition of a very patent fact. "It's kind of hard to make anything dance to the tune you want 'em to if it hasn't an ear for the music. But Rupert's got to dance to my whistling for a while yet; when the time comes he'll be all the better fitted to do his own whistling."

He was so restless and uneasy that, in spite of the pain it cost him, he managed to struggle up to a sitting posture on the side of the bed. Having got so far, he was compelled to spend some minutes in waiting on the vagaries of the bedroom furniture, which seemed suddenly endowed with motion of a singular kind—a wavering, billowy motion that had a dreadful tendency to engulf the room and its occupant in black oblivion. He had got considerably the better of the motion before he recognized it as only a deadly faintness in himself. Having recognized it, he kept on doggedly. He had dressed himself, after a fashion, and, staggering into the kitchen, had collapsed, rather than sunk, into a chair, before Mrs. Easton, who was washing dishes with a clatter indicative of the disturbed state of her mind, awoke to a knowledge of what he was doing. Her shrill and indignant remonstrance, when she did awake, was cut short by the reopening of the door as Nora again entered. She, too, cried out in astonishment at sight of her father, who, at first dumb with the pain that the exertion had cost him, now found voice enough to protest.

"What's the use of making such a fuss? I've only got a sprained ankle, anyway, and a few little scratches, the doctor says. I expect to be around all right in a day or two."

"A month or two, more like, if you're going to act up this way," responded his mother-in-law, severely. "But if you will run the risk of setting up, let me put your foot on this stool and put a piller under it." Both of which she did with the gentlest possible touch in spite of her caustic comments. Nora, after her first surprised ex-

clamation at sight of the injured man, not only out of bed, but dressed and in the kitchen, had not spoken, but, resuming her former attitude at the table, was again apparently studying the yellow flame of the kerosene lamp. Mr. Carrol, propped up in his chair with every nerve on the alert, was listening with an intentness to which every other sound proved a maddening interruption for a step on the walk outside—a step that did not come.

A long silence ensued, broken only by a soft rustling as Mrs. Easton turned the leaves of her Bible in quest of some supporting text. Mr. Carrol's unconfessed suspense becoming at length insupportable, he asked: "Did you hear or see anything of your brother when you were out just now, Eleanor?"

Nora withdrew her eyes from the contemplation of the yellow flame and regarded him gravely. "Yes, father, I heard him. He's out there in the barn—in the dark—playing on his violin. I didn't speak to him," she went on absently, her ears seemingly again filled with a strange, sad melody. "He was playing something that made me feel kind of bad."

"His playing 'most always has that effect on me," said the father, dryly, the apprehension that had been torturing him suddenly vanishing. He had feared that the boy, in a burst of rebellious rage, had left home, perhaps for good. Presently he went on in a gentler voice: "I suppose likely Rupert can't help being as he is. Maybe I hadn't any call to say that I'd set Cosme to watch him; Cosme ain't any such great shakes himself—Rupert ought to know that."

"Perhaps he does know it, father," Nora suggested, doubtfully.

"You mean that that would make the idea all the worse? I suppose it would. Well, I wish I had sent him to town instead of Cosme. Cosme could have managed the cattle, all right, and it would be kind of interesting to see what sort of mischief Rupert would get into in town."

At this juncture Mrs. Easton closed her book with unusual emphasis.

"I can't find it," she announced. "I'm pretty sure it's there, though. But it's true I might 'a' got hold of it in one of Mr. Wattses hymns instead of the Bible."

"Got hold of what, mother?" her son-in-law inquired with interest.

"Why some kind of a statement about a king that had a really scandulous temper, and, at last, the folks that had to do and to suffer along of his tantrums, they hit on the scheme of havin' a boy that had uncommon faculty in playin' on some kind of a musical thing—a jewsharp, or a mouth-organ, or, maybe, a fiddle; I dunno 'bout that—they hit on the scheme of havin' this boy come and play before him to keep him within bounds like. The scheme was a grand success, for the king was as mild and peaceable as a lamb while the boy was playin'; that's where the proverb, 'Music hath power to soothe the savage breast,' got its first start, I s'pose."

"You're sure you didn't think that proverb up yourself, mother, just to help Rupert out?" sarcastically inquired Mr. Carrol.

"Well, of all things! If you'd 'a' read your Bible half as faithful as I have, you'd 'a' known—"

What it was that he would have known, Mr. Carrol was destined never to find out, for, just then, the door opened and Rupert came in. Mrs. Easton stole a glance at his face and abruptly changed the subject.

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CHAPTER VII.

Nora's Charge.

UNDER the ministration of the gentle spirit that, for him, dwelt within the compass of his violin, Rupert's anger had entirely vanished.

When, after an hour or more, spent in playing, he reëntered the house, he had quite forgotten that he had left it in anger

such a short time before, and it was with a good deal of anxiety that he discovered his father sitting up in the kitchen.

"Why, father, ought you to be out here?" he inquired, doubtfully.

"As to that, I dare say it would be more to your liking if I kept my bed, but I'll try to have a little supervision of affairs yet awhile. Did you get the chores all done?"

"Yes; what Nora didn't do."

"That's right; pile your work on to another whenever you can."

"Father," interposed Nora, her voice trembling, "I didn't do enough to hurt myself, and Rupert has had such a hard day—if you only knew—"

"I know enough. Rupert 'll make hard times for himself and everybody else, wherever he is. Ain't you going to eat any supper, Rupert?"

"No; I'm not hungry."

"You'll manage to make yourself sick, I see, and then the cattle on the range 'll all be lost, with me tied up this way."

"Boys are cheap," observed Mrs. Easton, in an indignant aside, "but it would be dretful to lose a critter; there's a money value on critters!"

Mr. Carrol rose stiffly to his feet. "If you'll light a lamp in my room, Eleanor, I'll go back to bed; I see that my room is full as welcome as my company in this house."

His movements were so slow and halting, however, that Rupert sprang impulsively to his side. "Let me help you, father."

"No; I reckon Nora's right: you're all wore out. Sit down and rest, and I'll get along alone." But he did not refuse Nora's proffered aid when she came back from putting a light in his room; he even gave Mrs. Easton a parting shot on her account. "Girls ain't cheap, if boys are. I've found out that there's one girl that can be depended on, no matter how 'tis with her brother."

Rupert had gone to bed when Nora reappeared in the kitchen. Mrs. Easton had taken up the worn old Book that she was wont to consult in time of trouble, but she pushed it aside as the girl came in.

"What are you looking for, grandma?"

"Nothin' partic'lar; I was jest studyin' about your pa and Rupert, and a Bible verse that I know of come into my mind. You see, Nora, I've known your pa ever since he was a mite of a boy; I knew his father before him, too, and James' father was afflicted with the same kind of a stormy temper that he's got; it runs in the family."

Nora sat down and began pulling some long strands of her fine brown hair through her fingers. "We can't be blamed, then, for getting on the warpath, as Rupert calls it, if, as you say, it is our nature to," she said, thoughtfully.

"I didn't say it was your nature, child; you're different. Most folks, Eleanor, are a good deal like a hen that's just laid an egg. She ain't easy in her mind until she's cackled so's the whole poultry yard knows what a fine thing she's done. And so 'tis with folks. They can't rest, nor let anyone else rest, until they've run all over the neighborhood with the tale of what they've done, or thought of doin'.

"And, in the end, they're quite as likely to be satisfied with declarin' their intentions of doin' some big thing as they would be with doin' it. More so, mebbe, for I've took notice, this many a year, that the folks that brag about their work, or their talents, or their industry, most gen'lly take it all out in braggin'. It wasn't so with the Carrols; they were secretive. They were forever denyin' themselves things that they really needed in order to buy something that should prove a gratifyin' surprise to some other member of the family, and—I am not sayin' that it's a partic'larly agreeable way," she added, impartially, "but it was their way. And sometimes when James is uncommon ha'sh with Rupert, I can't help thinkin' of his father and his ways, and it makes me think that James has certainly got

somethin' in view for Rupert, and, knowin' in his own heart that he means to do well by Rupert—for he does mean that—anyway, it's powerful aggravatin' to him to find that Rupert's way is so different from his. He's like that hen we've read of, that hatched out a duck in place of the chick she was expectin'. Nora, I always felt kind of sorry for that hen—more 'n I did for the duck, if anythin'—'cause the duck had all its life before it, while the hen she'd been 'lottin' on the comfort she was goin' to take with that chick. And what comfort did she get out of the duck? Not a whit. Rupert he's a duck, where James has use for a chicken, and jest here comes in that verse I was thinkin' of. Someone who 'pears to have been kind of reproached for not keepin' an eye on them that was prone to get into trouble, and helpin' them to steer clear of it, asks: 'Am I my brother's keeper?' as if it ought not to be expected of him to look out for others. I think he was wrong there, Eleanor, and I've pretty nigh made up my mind that that is one of the pieces of work the Lord has laid out for you. He's kind of lookin' to you to be your brother's keeper."

The kitchen clock ticked loudly, while Nora sat silently considering this proposition and all that it implied. The cat, whose devotion to her was inconveniently strong, sprang into her lap, where she sat working her claws, and purring loudly in expectation of a caress. Nora laid her brown little hand on the furry head. "That's a good thought, grandma, and I'm going to try to live up to it."

"Well, child, I ain't real sure that I should ever 'a' thought of the matter in that light, exactly, if you hadn't 'a' been livin' up to it pretty faithful all along," Mrs. Easton admitted, candidly. "Come," she continued, "it's high time we was abed."

Rupert had said in confidence to his grandmother that he could not rest until those steers, now in the Valdez corral, were safe on the east range. In consequence, Mrs. Easton was astir so early that the gray light of dawn was just struggling in at the kitchen windows when she and Nora and Rupert sat down to the breakfast table. Mr. Carrol was still sleeping, and the three spoke but little for fear of disturbing him; but, as Rupert got up from the table, Nora also got up. "You know I'm going with you," she said.

Rupert, who had just tiptoed into his father's room to get the key of the stable door from its nail at the foot of his bed, paused, swinging the key on one finger, and looked at her thoughtfully. "I don't know as you ought to, Nora; father wouldn't like it, maybe."

"You know he didn't object—he almost praised me—when he found that I had taken out the colt, to help you last night; and he didn't object, either, when I told him that I wanted to go with you this morning."

"That's true. I wouldn't let you go if it wasn't for that. I don't want to get into any more trouble. And I don't think I shall really need you, young lady, except for your company. You're better for company than you are for a cowboy."

"Don't be too sure of that; wait till I've had as much practice in the business as you have."

"Well, that you'll never have, not if I'm alive and can stop you. Come on. You shall ride Vidette, who's got sense, and I'll ride the colt, who hasn't, so we'll be well matched all around."

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CHAPTER VIII.

The Cougar in the Corral.

IT WAS not a long ride from the ranch house to the deserted corral where the cattle had been secured, but it was long enough to have taken what Rupert called "the edge" off both Vidette and the colt before they came close enough to it to observe that there was something unusual going on among the cattle.

At that early hour, and after the hard drive of the day before, the steers would naturally, if undisturbed, be quiet and still resting.

That such was not the case was amply testified by the clouds of dust that rolled up from the enclosure—much as if, save that its color was gray instead of blue, it had been the smoke of a raging fire.

"Well," Rupert exclaimed, in surprise, "what on earth can be the matter now!"

He checked his horse, and Nora followed his example.

"Listen!" he said.

Out from the eddying whirl of dust there came to their ears clearly, now that the clatter of the horses' hoofs no longer interfered with their hearing, the sound of furious, angry bellowing. Rupert, greatly concerned, touched the bay colt with his spurred heel.

"Sounds as if they were having the time of their lives, all by themselves," he remarked to Nora, who was keeping close beside him, for Vidette, without waiting for instructions, was running neck and neck with the colt.

"It does sound that way," Nora assented. Secretly, she was a good deal alarmed. To drive a herd of peaceable cattle anywhere, that was all right—an undertaking that no one need be afraid of; but a mass of enraged and fighting beasts—that was a different matter. Still, she had not the slightest intention of holding back or seeking safely in flight.

But Rupert instantly recognized a danger that had not occurred to her.

"Now, Nora, if those fool cattle are fighting among themselves, you turn square about and put for home."

"No, Rupert. I—"

"Now you'll do exactly as I say. I don't know that they are fighting, but it sounds very much like it. I never knew, or heard, of an entire bunch getting on the warpath with each other, as these seem, judging by the noise they are making, to have done. If they have, I'll just ride up quietly, open the corral gate, and run for it before they find out what's happened. They'll come pouring out, and, likely, cool down when they find the gate is open; they're terribly hungry, and we ought to be able to handle them—that is, unless you are obliged to run for home."

"But, Rupert—"

"There are no 'buts' about it, Nora. You don't understand. The danger isn't in what you'll do, but in what your horse will do. Vidette is so well trained, she knows her business so well, that if she sees a chance to make herself useful, she's going to do it, regardless. Now stop." He brought the colt to a halt, and Vidette promptly followed the colt's example.

"You see that low butte, right there?" He pointed to the square-topped hill on his left.

"Yes."

"Well, if the cattle start down this way, when I let them out, you ride to the top of that butte. Until then just stay where you are. If it's safe for you to come on, I'll whistle for you."

Accordingly, Nora held in the chafing Vidette while Rupert hurried on to the corral. Arrived at the gate, she saw him stop his horse and look into the enclosure. It seemed to her a long time, though in reality it was less than five minutes before his high, clear whistle sounded, summoning her. When she had reached his side, Rupert pointed silently toward the center of the enclosure. The bay colt, with head erect and eyes distended with terror, was trembling violently, but, true to the good blood that was in him, stanchly held his ground.

"What is it? What is it?" she cried, as Vidette, unconcerned, stopped beside her brother's trembling mount. Rupert shook his head. Fifty steers, inside the corral, in the full swing of a Wagnerian chorus, made such an uproar that to hear any lesser sound was entirely out of the question; but

"This part of the circus is past hurting anything."

he pointed to the center of the corral, and Nora made out, rather from the motion of his lips than from any sounds that she heard, that he was telling her to wait until the dust settled a little, or until the crowding animals fell back.

Vidette, afraid of nothing, crowded closer, and put her nose inquiringly over the top bar. Then she stamped and shook her head angrily.

Rupert, from his higher seat on the back of the tall bay, leaned down to pat his pet approvingly.

"Good little girl! You'd like to get a chance at that cougar yourself, wouldn't you?" he said.

Then, motioning Nora to follow, he turned and rode away from the corral until they were at a sufficient distance to enable them to hear each other speak.

"There's a cougar in there, and they're all taking a hand, or a hoof, in trampling it to death," Rupert informed his sister.

"A cougar!"

"Exactly; a cougar, and I'm rather sorry for him. The Valdez corral has not been used for a long time, and it looks to me as if this particular unfortunate may have taken up his residence in it. There are two or three stalls, dark and spooky, at the south end, just the places for a skulking wild animal to pitch on for a lair. This fellow was probably in there last night when we turned the cattle in, and just lay quiet until along about daylight before trying to get away. Or he may have made a kill. I'm almost afraid he has, and that that is why the cattle are so excited. It doesn't seem as if they would get so perfectly maniacal just because a cougar happens to come among them; besides, if there was nothing else, it's necessary for me to get into fresh trouble, and getting one of Wilson's steers killed would be a good start toward it.

"Well, the cougar showed up among them, but he'll never show up anywhere else. I'm going back, now, to open the gate. You ride close up to the fence on the north side and stay there. The cattle are crazy enough, but if you keep back they'll not notice you. They must have a chance to spread out and get clear of the corral before we can do anything with them.

"Stay close, and I'll join you in a minute; then I'll see that Vidette doesn't put a finger in this pie, as she looks as if she would like to."

Nora obeyed instructions, and Rupert, riding again to the corral gate, swung low down from his saddle, removed the peg that held down the heavy bolt, lifted the bolt, and swung the gate wide open. Then he turned again and rode up beside the fence where Nora waited.

The cattle began at once to pour out. They were, as Rupert had said, desperately hungry as well as thirsty, for they had had no chance to graze during the previous afternoon, and they had spent the night in the corral in lively controversy with a cougar.

Mounted, as they were, brother and sister could look over the corral wall, and it was with much satisfaction that they noted that the open gate held a greater attraction for the infuriated cattle than did the torn and trampled semblance of what had once been a magnificent cougar.

When the last steer had trotted clumsily out of the enclosure, Rupert rode in. Nora, from her station beside the fence, watched with breathless anxiety, fearful yet that the trapped creature might have some life in it.

"Come in," Rupert called, at last. "Come right in. This part of the circus is past hurting or helping anything more in this world. See," he continued, as Nora joined him, "they've made a pancake, and a big one, too, of this fellow. I wonder, now, if he did make his lair in here." To settle this point Rupert rode slowly around the corral, peering sharply into the dark recesses of the empty stalls.

"There might be cubs—or a mate! Do

be careful, Rupert!" Nora entreated.

"Well, if he, or she, had a mate, the mate is, luckily for itself, off on a vacation. There are no cubs, and nothing else but 'bones and blood,' same's that 'cross old bear' left in his cave in the good old days of Horatius. There's plenty of bones in this stall, the one farthest west. Come on up and look in for yourself. It's pretty plain that Mr. Cougar had taken up his abode here, and that we intruded on his solitude."

"Oh, I'm so glad that none of the cattle were killed!" Nora exclaimed.

"Yes; a steer or two killed would have made a complication, sure enough. It must be that my luck is changing. I don't know when such a golden opportunity for my getting into trouble has been passed up before. As it is, it's fortunate for me that the cattle are to go to a range that's several miles from the ranch house. Judging from the looks of a good many of those cattle, that cougar certainly did put up a gallant fight."

"Why, how is that?" Nora asked, in quick alarm, lest, after all, Rupert might be confronted with another difficulty.

"Well, you can see for yourself, when we round them up. The sides and flanks of a score of them are torn and gashed by the cougar's claws and teeth, but there are no bones broken, and they are all able to eat. They'll be all right again long before father or Mr. Wilson gets around to inspect them. Wilson has gone to El Paso; that's why I've had to do this work—and what a mess it's been, too! Come on, now, let's hustle them along. There's a water hole on their new range, and they must be thirsty enough to be willing to go to it by this time."

This surmise was so correct that the difficulty proved, after the steers were once headed in the right direction, not to be to keep them going, but to keep up with them. Long before noon they were safely established on, as Rupert described it, "the place they long had sought," and brother and sister turned their horses' heads homeward, very thankful that this piece of troublesome and adventurous work was safely over with.

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CHAPTER IX.

Rupert Resolves on Disobedience.

"I WONDER," said Nora, suddenly breaking a long silence, "where Daisy is? Father was speaking of her last night. He said that he had intended to have her brought up."

"She's all right," Rupert returned, rather absently. "I saw her with the rest of the home herd two or three days ago. I got off my horse, and she came up and began nosing around my pockets in search of some dainty. You've spoiled her for the rough life of the range, Nora, but she does look pretty."

"I'd like to see her; it's been a long time since I've seen her."

"Any time that you like to ride over toward the Muldoon Hills you'll probably see the apple of your eye grazing with others of her kind," returned Rupert.

"Not with others of her kind," retorted Nora, with a laugh. "There are no others of her kind in New Mexico, I believe. I'm so glad that those cattlemen gave her to me, when they came along through here with that herd and she was so worn out that she couldn't go any farther. You wouldn't think, to look at her now, that she was such a weak little scrap of skin and bones less than two years ago."

"Oh, yes, I'm glad you've got her," Rupert said, still absently.

"You remember, don't you, that Cosme's father was quite put out because the men, who had stopped with him over night, didn't give her to him instead of to me?" pursued Nora.

"Was he? The old rascal! I'd forgotten it, if I ever did know. Say, Nora, I

do wish that it was of any use to ask father to let me go over to the 7-H to-night. I know it's of no use to expect it, especially now, when he's so mad at me. They're going to have a dance. I don't care a straw for that, but Valasco De Vargas is to be there, and I'd give—I don't know what I wouldn't give, if I had it—for the sake of hearing him play."

Nora, who sympathized with Rupert's musical tastes and secretly believed him to be a genius, knew all about De Vargas. "Oh, I wish you could go!" she exclaimed. "I do wish you could! How is it that De Vargas happens to be out there?"

Rupert explained, and added, glancing at the face that had kindled at the mention of the violinist's name, "I wish that we could both go, Nora. You'd enjoy it as much as I, I expect."

Nora shook her head. "No, we couldn't both leave, anyway, and we ought not to, with father hurt as he is. I'll do anything that he wants of you, though, and be glad to, if he'll let you go."

"Well, I won't ask him," declared Rupert, stubbornly. "It won't do any good, if I do."

"I'm afraid it won't do any good if I do, either," said Nora, "but I mean to do it. Why, you have never heard a really good player in your life, and you ought to have a chance to judge whether he plays any better than you do."

Rupert laughed. "What a little brick you are, Nora! No going back on your own in you, is there? If I played in public I daresay you think I'd soon be as famous as De Vargas himself?"

"Why not? I should think so; indeed, you'd be more so, because you are an American, and De Vargas is only a Mexican, anyway."

"Mexican, white or Indian, it's all one. Father won't let me go to hear him; he hates the whole business."

Rupert's prophecy proved so far correct that it seemed robbed of the dignity, even, of prophecy, but appeared simply a recital of some foreknowledge. Mr. Carrol, on being consulted, not only sensibly refused to allow him to participate in a frolic that would keep him up all night, as well as necessitate a twenty-mile ride, but he was evidently surprised that Nora, whom he accounted ordinarily reasonable, should ask it.

"There are cattle thieves around," he said, in conclusion, "and the range must be watched mighty close. What will Rupert be fit for, after he's been out kicking up his heels all night? If there was nothing else, I don't approve of them rough dances—"

"It isn't the dance," Nora assured him, eagerly. "It's the violinist, De Vargas—"

"Worse and worse! The idea of riding twenty miles on top of a hard day's work—for Rupert will have to get in those cattle from the Vermijo this afternoon—just to hear a greasy Mexican fiddler! I'm astonished at you, Nora; I should think you'd have more respect for your brother than to ask it! I tell you, Rupert wants to keep straight, and to keep out of low company. I've got something better than getting mixed up in any cowboy fracas in store for him, now I give notice!"

Nora, recalling what her grandmother had said only the evening before as to the dominant traits of the Carrols, said nothing in reply to this ambiguous speech. Perhaps her grandmother was right, though she had not thought so before, and his father really had some project on foot for Rupert's lasting benefit. The vague, half-confirmation that her father's words gave to this idea afforded her so much satisfaction that it was with quite a radiant face that she left the room and went out to find Rupert.

Rupert was at the woodpile hacking away at a twisted cedar log. Wood-cutting was a part of Cosme's work, but the Mexican usually contented himself with the assurance that there was enough on hand, ready cut, to cook another meal. It did not seem

to him necessary to make provision for a future more remote than that.

Rupert looked up as Nora approached, and the brightness in her face was reflected for an instant in his own. "Did he say I might go?" he asked eagerly, adding: "You look as though he did."

"No, he didn't; he isn't willing for you to go, Rupert."

"What made you look so glad, then?" demanded the boy, dropping the axe and staring at his sister, all the brightness gone from his face.

"Did I look glad?" stammered Nora, guiltily. "It—it was something else."

With a pang beside which that caused by his father's refusal to allow him to attend the dance was as nothing, Rupert found himself suddenly confronted with the idea that his sister, the one in whom he trusted above all others, might have interests apart from his—might, nay, did, have secrets from him. Why didn't she tell him what had made her so happy all at once? Bending to his task again with averted face, he plied the axe, while Nora, feeling miserably that she had been guilty of looking pleased when her brother was sorry, looked on in silence. Finally she said: "Father wants you to drive in the cows from the round-up camp on the Vermijo this afternoon. You know they were left to shift for themselves when father was brought home."

"All right; I'll go as soon as I've cut a little more wood," answered Rupert, coldly.

"Leave the wood for Cosme," Nora advised. "He'll be back some time this afternoon, and you've got enough cut for now."

"Don't worry about me," was the ungracious retort. "There's no danger of my hurting myself; ask father if there is."

Feeling that in his present mood her presence served only to irritate him, Nora walked slowly away toward the house.

Rupert cast an angry glance after her. "You may look as happy as you please, Miss Nora, because father denies me every pleasure, and everything else that he possibly can," he muttered, "but I'm going to hear De Vargas to-night, whatever father says. He has no right to deprive me of every advantage. It isn't just the pleasure alone—and he knows it—it's the educational part, and I'm gong—I'm going."

All his latent kindliness toward his father, his reasonable toleration for what, in his saner moods, he recognized as merely outbursts of the high and uncontrollable temper that formed, as his grandmother had so often painstakingly pointed out, an unfortunate heritage for his father, suddenly hardened into a kind of sullen determination to have his own way, to do the thing that he most desired to do, at whatever cost.

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CHAPTER X.

A Lesson in Arithmetic.

COSME, the Mexican helper, reached the ranch house with his load of supplies on the evening of the same day that Rupert and Nora had had the interesting experience of witnessing a fight between a herd of cattle and a cougar. Rupert was not yet back from his trip to the Cimarron, and this fact, for reasons best known to himself, seemed to afford the young Mexican a good deal of satisfaction. Not that the Mexican feared, in the least, that Rupert had failed to keep his promise in that matter of the attempted trip to Sulphur Butte, but there were other later treacheries that he had an uneasy suspicion that Rupert might divine, though having the fullest confidence in his own ability when it came to hoodwinking Rupert's father. Rupert's father believed in him, while Rupert, Cosme felt with a bitter sense of injury, did not and never had. He recognized that it was going to be a hard matter to keep Rupert in a state of ignorance concerning his, Cosme's, misdeeds,

and it was, therefore, most desirable that he should have an opportunity to recite the events of his trip to Pinos Altos without being subjected to any cross-examination from the too keen-witted young American.

On entering the house and learning of the accident that had befallen its head, Cosme ventured to express his respectful sympathy and commiseration. His polite regrets were cut short midway of their utterance by the invalid's ordering him to bring into the kitchen the various articles he had been commissioned to purchase.

The order was obeyed with cheerful alacrity, and Cosme stood by, looking on with a face of innocent interest, while Mr. Carrol slowly checked off the list.

The inspection proved entirely satisfactory, and then Mr. Carrol said: "Seems to me there ought to have been some change back from that twenty dollars that I gave you."

"Well, of all things!" interrupted Mrs. Easton. "Did you trust Cosme with twenty dollars? Why, he can't count ten cents straight! Besides, I thought you always had things that you sent for by Cosme charged, and paid for them when you or Rupert went into town."

"Well, that's right; I do generally, but this time I let Cosme take the money. You say there was nothing left, Cosme?"

"That w'at I buy cos' viente dollah; not some less. It was on 'count 'at new t'ing 'at gov'ment put up—'at stariff—'at it cos' not some less as viente dollah."

"I been thinking all along that the tariff would prove a bad thing for us poor farmers," replied Mr. Carrol. "Well, take care of your horses, Cosme; I daresay they're tired enough."

The black eye of the Mexican glinted inquiringly around the premises as he left the house. He had seen nothing of Nora since he came in, but, just as he was coming out of the stable door after having cared for the horses, he caught a glimpse of her pink dress flitting along the path to the spring down under the cliff near the root cellar, and, dropping his pitchfork, he hastened after her.

Nora looked back, startled, as the sound of hurried footsteps following her caught her ear. "Oh, is that you, Cosme? I didn't know you had got back yet."

"Yes, me I was got back a long time. How come you no see 'at?"

"Oh, I started to go to the spring for some water an hour ago, but I stopped to look at a little pocket of black sand beside the trail, and—" Nora checked herself suddenly. But she had already said enough to fully enlighten the young Mexican.

"'At pocket black san' no good such place as 'at; too small pay for work; give all out in no time 'tall."

"What do you mean?"

"All 'em pocket full of gol'-like 'nuff," Cosme continued, mournfully. "But me, I no care for gol'; w'at gol' w'en a mans has no educate'. If I was educate', me, I would dig up gol' and jewel, like w'at Señora Easton tell of, an' I would be a mighty man in 'e lan'."

Nora had always felt a kind of instinctive distrust for her father's brown-faced young employé, but this tone of gentle melancholy in speaking of something that, for him, was practically unattainable, disarmed her vague suspicion and won her sympathy. "I wish that all of us had a better chance to learn something, Cosme," she said, putting down the water pail and leaning thoughtfully against a jutting rock beside the narrow trail.

Cosme picked up the pail. "I gets the water for you, señorita. I do more as 'at for anyone w'at was sorrowful for my no educate'. Señora Easton, she say I was not could count ten cent. I can do 'at; she was mistake, but"—Cosme spoke slowly and with curious precision; if Nora had been less intent upon the bits of gravel that she was pushing about with the toe of her shoe, she would have seen that he was watching her with keen anxiety—"I

no can do w'at you call sums in 'at 'rithumtic w'at tells about figgers."

"Would you like to study arithmetic?" Nora asked, looking at him in surprise.

Cosme shifted his gaze to the bits of gravel. "I have not good 'nuff know how to read 'at Englis'," he replied, evasively. "But sometime I was get to study to myself, an' I make up w'at you call sums, like it was this one: suppose, now, 'at one boy, or one man, he have viente dollah—"

"Twenty dollars, that is. Yes?"

"Si; an' suppose he have spen' all 'at viente dollah, an' suppose he work for a man w'at pay him ten dollah a mont'. How long it goin' take 'at man, or 'at boy, to get hole of viente dollah again?"

"How long? Why, two months, of course."

"Two mont's? Si, it was take two mont's." Cosme again took up the pail that he had dropped in the intensity of his interest in the solution of his "sum." "I go get 'at water for you now, Señorita," he said, moving away.

"Wait, Cosme. You know I have always felt sorry that there were no schools here for your people, and I think, if you want to learn, that you ought to have a chance. If you would like to study arithmetic—"

Cosme shook his head. "Mi padre he say I no got very big min'. I goin' study over 'at sum w'at I tell you, but I no try to put too much in my min' at once for fear 'at he goin' bust."

"It would be an awful pity to have such a thing as that happen to your mind," returned Nora, laughing, as she turned back toward the house, while Cosme went on to the spring.

. . . . . .

It was so hard for Mr. Carrol to keep quiet that he was now hobbling around on improvised crutches; supported by them, he was standing in the doorway as Cosme came up with the water. He stood aside to let the Mexican pass, remarking: "Your father's away on the round-up now, isn't he, Cosme?"

"Si; he was gone on 'at roun'-up for be gone six or ten weeks 'is time," responded Cosme, cheerfully.

"That's too bad; I was in hopes I could get him to work for me for a few days."

"It was too late for think of 'at," replied Cosme, with conviction. "He was goin' be gone two mont's, I bet you." The young Mexican had so powerful a reason for wishing that his austere parent might be kept busy at a distance for some time to come, that his wishes unconsciously colored his statement.

Valdez, senior, having been unexpectedly delayed, had not yet departed on the long and lonely riding tour that Cosme knew he was about to undertake. As a matter of fact, Valdez, stationed at the present on the Cimarron, and not too far away, finding an off day on his hands, had decided to make use of it in going to town for supplies, and when he came to that decision, a well-merited retribution was already on his son's track.

Rupert came in late to supper at the end of his long day's work. He found his father lying on the lounge in the kitchen, and, as he sat alone at the table, his father's gaze dwelt on him with so much interest that Rupert suddenly resolved to ask, on his own account, the favor that had been refused at Nora's intercession. He pushed away his plate and looked wistfully at the recumbent figure in the corner.

"Father," he said, "I would like to go over to the 7-H to-night, to hear Valesco De Vargas play."

"Yes, your sister told me this morning that you wanted to, and, I own, I was surprised. There are cattle thieves around, and here I am, tied by the ankle to a lounge or an easy-chair. All the heavy work of the range is on your shoulders—for I can't afford to hire help, even if there was any to hire, which there isn't—and you want to go scouring across country to a cowboy dance!"

"It isn't the dance," Rupert reminded him, eagerly. "You know what it is, father, but you hate my music worse than you do the cowboy dances!" he concluded, bitterly.

"And why, in the name of all that's sensible, you want to bring up that subject again, is more 'n I can tell!" interposed Mrs. Easton, briskly. "'Pears like when things begin to kind of simmer down and cool off you might let 'em alone, but you're like that hymn speaks of—'and tear agape that healing wound afresh'; 'pears like you might let things heal up."

"Well, he's not going to any 7-H or 7-I to-night, and that's all there is about it!" declared Rupert's father, decisively. To Nora, a silent but sympathetic listener to the brief dialogue, there seemed something half relenting in the tone in which her father immediately added: "Why don't you and Nora have a game of backgammon? That's int'resting, even to folks looking on, which is more than you can say for anyone looking on at a dance, or at a fiddling—it's all the same thing."

"I want to hear De Vargas," Rupert repeated quietly, but, if his father could have guessed it, with a decision as inflexible as his own.

Cosme was sitting in a corner of the kitchen, silent, as usual, his black eyes placidly observant of his white associates. The Mexican lad seldom spoke unless he had learned some new English words and wished to try their effect, but now he broke in unexpectedly: "That De Vargas—once I hear him at a perform'—he play—" Cosme flung out his brown hands, fingers extended and palms upward in mute rapture—"he play so as los angels goin' come at him to hark."

"I reckon not," returned his employer, scornfully. "When the angels want to hear good fiddling—if there is any good—they can probably get to hear it without coming down here to listen to any greasy Mexican. You'd better get to bed, Cosme."

The young Mexican, taking his snubbing amiably, as usual, arose obediently and disappeared up the crooked little stairway that led to his sleeping quarters in the attic.

"I reckon I'll go to bed, too," observed Mr. Carrol, yawning. "I didn't sleep very well last night."

"I hope you'll sleep well to-night," was Rupert's mental rejoinder to this statement. In spite of his angry thoughts, however, and the inward spur of the disobedience that he was resolved upon committing, it troubled him to see the usually active man struggling painfully to an upright position. Forgetting the rebuff of the previous evening, he went to his father's side and silently offered the support of his shoulder, and this time it was not refused. When he had gained the bedroom and sunk down on the side of the bed, Mr. Carrol asked: "Did you lock the barn door, Rupert?"

"Yes," returned Rupert, his heart-beats quickening with apprehension of the very question that came next:

"What did you do with the key?"

"It's in my pocket."

"That's no place for it; hang it up where it belongs."

"Yes, sir," replied the lad, obeying readily.

"St. Peter keeps the golden key," murmured Mrs. Easton, who had followed them with the lamp, "and what a time of it he must have! I've thought, many a time, that I wouldn't be in his shoes, not for any consideration you could name. Look at the responsibility! Why, of the two, I'd a sight ruther have Gabriel's job, and I never thought I should like that."

"I don't much expect you'll ever be called on to take either one of 'em," said Mr. Carrol, smiling.

There was no answering smile on Rupert's face as he bade his father goodnight and left the room. There was more than one key in his pocket, and the one that he had hung on the nail in his father's room was not the key to the barn door.

CHAPTER XI.

The Light in the Fog.

GOING directly to his room, Rupert undressed and went to bed—but not to sleep. He had not retired with any such commonplace intention as that. For a long time he lay with eyes wide open and ears strained to catch the slightest sound. At last he heard what he was waiting for. The kitchen door was opened, and his grandmother put the cat outside, with the usual admonition to that member of the family to "go to the barn and catch a mouse." Then he caught Nora's light step as she stole softly to the door of their father's room and heard her ask if there was anything that she could do for him before she went to bed. A low-toned "No" was the answer. After that he heard the opening and closing of the door of Nora's room, followed, directly, by the prodigious sounds that his grandmother made in blowing out the lamp. How many times he had laughed quietly to himself as the familiar sounds came to his ears! For Mrs. Easton was not built on the model of one who can do things quietly, and her nightly struggles to extinguish the lamplight were far from silent ones, each noisy and laborious exhalation of breath being followed usually by such emphatic and uncomplimentary exclamations as: "There, drat it! You didn't get out that time, did you? Take that!" Puff! puff! "Well, of all the contraptions, this kar'sene lamp is the most aggravatin'! I'd ten times ruther have a taller dip, myself, but I s'pose that wouldn't be modern enough for this family. There, you're out, are you?" and the final groping across the room in the darkness, when the old lady seemed to come in violent contact with each and every chair that they had ever owned.

The little comedy went on as usual this evening, but Rupert heard it without amusement. What he had been waiting for was the ensuing silence—a silence that seemed to deepen and grow more intense as the night wore on. Sure, at last, that the family were all sleeping soundly, Rupert got up and dressed himself in the dark—not in his everyday attire, but in the suit reserved for Sundays and special occasions. Then he took the stable key from the pocket of the trousers that he had worn that day, and, shoes in hand, crept noiselessly across the kitchen. Just as he reached the kitchen door the clock began striking; he stood, with the door open, counting the strokes—eleven. The moon would not rise for an hour yet. Closing the door as silently as he had opened it, he sat down on the doorstep, drew on his shoes, and hurried to the barn. Unlocking the door, he went inside, feeling his way past the stalls where the work horses were drowsily munching their hay, until he came to the one occupied by his pony. His heart was in his throat for a breathless instant when, peering intently into the darkness of the enclosure, he could make out no dim form, as he had been able to do in the other stalls.

"Vidette! Vidette!" he whispered anxiously.

A joyous whinny answered the call, as the pony, who had been lying down, scrambled rather stiffly to her feet.

"Poor Vidette! You're just about played out," murmured Rupert, remorsefully. "Well, I won't take you out again to-night. I won't take you, either, you clumsy elephant!" he disdainfully informed the bay colt, who was Vidette's stall mate, and who went on eating, undisturbed by this threat. From the bay colt's point of view the world had nothing better to offer than plenty of well-cured grama grass, ripened by the sun and the winds that wander unhindered over the wide expanse of the Tefoya Mesa.

Turning about, Rupert made his way past the horses again until he reached Snowflake's stall. The petted creature stretched out her soft nose and sniffed at him inquiringly. Then, as Rupert held out his hand, she licked the palm in which she

had expected to find some sugar. "I'm going to give you a dash, my beauty," Rupert told her, patting her nose coaxingly.

Because his father's saddle was already adjusted to this particular horse, Rupert took it down from its hook on the wall and tossed it over her back, then he cinched it tightly, while the mare, turning her head, watched operations with the grave air of a connoisseur. In leading her out, Rupert stumbled and fell on the threshold. The mare was so close on his heels that, as she suddenly stopped in her tracks, her advancing foot remained uplifted over his prostrate body.

"Good girl! Good girl!" whispered Rupert, springing to his feet and patting her tenderly. "You might have smashed me, if you hadn't stopped. I don't know but what I deserve smashing for taking you out this way, but I reckon it'll come out all right, if you'll just travel."

So saying, he relocked the barn door, put the key in his pocket, and mounted. The mare had already more than proclaimed her willingness to travel. She was dancing and curvetting in delight at the prospect of a run. Rupert held her in until he was well past the silent house, then gave her the rein, and, rejoicing in the chance to stretch her limbs, she loped away, swift as the wind.

Although he was perfectly familiar with the entire country within a radius of ten or fifteen miles from his home, it happened that Rupert had had little occasion to traverse the unfrequented road to the 7-H ranch house. The road was, in fact, so little used that, in the clear light of day it was but a dim trail of hoofs and a few wheel tracks, faintly indicated on the tough, wiry grama grass, too resistent to be crushed by either hoofs or wheels, or to long retain the imprint of their passing. In addition to the difficulty of the trail a late-risen fog had, since sunset, swept down from the high range to the north, and was slowly but surely obscuring all landmarks, and this despite the illuminating aid of a full moon.

Confident in his knowledge of the general direction to be taken, however, Rupert rode on without drawing rein, and without making any particular attempt to follow the road until his own home was fully five miles behind him. The 7-H Ranch was nearly twenty miles distant—not far, as neighbors go, in that land of clear air and level roads. Rupert calculated that he would be able to reach the scene of festivities before midnight, that he might remain for a couple of hours, and return long before either he or Snowflake should be missed. It was perfectly true, as he had told his father, that he did not care for the dance itself.

Such rough and questionable entertainments as these were apt to be did not appeal to him. What he desired was to hear the famous violinist's tone, to observe the handling of the instrument. De Vargas and his violin alone on a hillside would have proved, for him, just as strong an attraction as could De Vargas as the center of the orchestra of a cowboy dance. That he was wearing himself out, rendering himself, through so much hard riding and loss of sleep, unfit for the work that his father depended upon him to do, and that, especially under existing circumstances, he was bound in honor as well as duty to do, and to do well and cheerfully, never once occurred to Rupert. His thoughts were centered absolutely, to the exclusion of all other considerations, upon himself and the gratification of his own desires.

Suddenly as, hat in hand—lest at the gait he was riding it should blow off and be lost—and bent low over the saddle-horn, with his hair tossing wildly in the wind and his eager eyes aglow, he fancied that he could see, at a considerable distance ahead, a faint illumination, as of a light shining dimly in the fog. Halting, he looked long and intently at the spot that

might be a light. "Or, it may be a good deed," he thought, whimsically. "How like a candle in the dark shines a good deed in this naughty world!" Satisfied at last that it was a light, and not so very far ahead of him, Rupert ran over in his mind several explanations that might account for its being there. Still, with the habit of caution that becomes instinctive with the plainsmen, young or old, Rupert dropped silently from the saddle to the ground. He had already discovered he was not directly on the 7-H road, even if he was anywhere near it. One of his mental explanations required that he should be near it; it might be that the light was that of some belated party on the way to the dance—someone who had met with an accident perhaps, and been forced to stop. Convinced, after a hurried search, that wherever the 7-H road was, it was not near him, Rupert started out to locate it.

Bridle in hand, he led Snowflake several yards to the right, then as far to the left—no road. Inwardly chafing at the loss of time that it would entail, Rupert yet resolved to find out definitely what the light, far from any traveled road, meant at that hour of the night.

To this end he led Snowflake back for some distance, hoping the while that whoever was accountable for the light's being there had not yet heard her approaching footsteps. If they had not he knew that it was owing to the deadening effect of the fog, and he devoutly hoped that the fog would still continue to favor him. When he judged that he had got far enough away from the vicinity of the light, he tied Snowflake's bridle to a strong branch of a low mesquite, and, leaving her with the injunction to keep very still, started back to investigate the source of the light. He was a little startled to find, on again approaching it, how much nearer he had been to it before dismounting than he had supposed; moreover, it was plain that Snowflake's rapid footfalls had been heard.

In a sheltered, almost overhanging, recess of the sheer wall that suddenly dropped, mesa fashion, without warning to a lower level—much as if the lower land had parted company from the upper by slumping straight downward away from it—was, as Rupert, stealing noiselessly nearer and nearer, soon discovered, a campfire of the most economical construction. Over the fire two men were hovering; one was yawning and stretching sleepily, as if just aroused from a nap, which, indeed, was the case, while the other busied himself in propping a coffee pot securely over the tiny flame. Beyond the fire, close at hand, Rupert caught the vague outlines of two saddled horses, tied in a clump of mesquite, and, beside them, two others that had on rope halters only. Rupert could see that the sleepy man was talking—grumbling, he judged by the accompanying pantomime—and that the other was making no reply.

"Huh!" thought Rupert. "Sitting down on the plains, miles from anywhere, to make coffee at midnight; no blankets—at least there's none in sight—and no camp equipage except that coffee pot! Now I wonder what that means?"

It is unlikely that his interest in finding out what it meant would have been strong enough to delay him longer had not the man who was bending solicitously over the coffee pot looked up, suddenly and sharply as if in irritated contradiction of something that his companion was saying. The firelight, such as it was, fell full upon his face, and Rupert, with a start of surprise that was almost akin to terror, recognized Ham Hardy. His mind flew back in instant review of what he had learned, in common with other people, of the man who was crouching over the fire.

During the spring round-up of the year before, Mr. Carrol, who was very short of help, had engaged Ham—an expert cowhand—to help during the round-up. Ham had worked faithfully, as Rupert recalled the circumstances, for about a week—long

enough to have enabled him to become thoroughly familiar with the premises, outside and in, and with the daily and nightly habits of the family. Then, one morning at the breakfast table Ham had suddenly announced his intention of quitting the job.

To Mr. Carrol's indignant inquiry as to his reasons for so doing, Ham had responded, with an insolent look at Mrs. Easton, who reigned supreme in the kitchen:

"Don't like the grub—that's why!"

Mr. Carrol, white with wrath, had leaped from his chair as if with the intention of attacking the boor, but he was stayed by Mrs. Easton's impassioned entreaty:

"James, James, let him alone! I'm surprised at you! Can't you see that the poor critter has never before in his life set at a table where decent food was spread? He ain't to blame. He's used to livin' on tobacco and cheap coffee, as airy one with eyes in their heads can see by the looks of him. Let him alone—do!"

Mr. Carrol had taken her advice as far as laying violent hands on him went, but he had ordered the glowering reprobate to "Get out!" an order which Hardy, grinning maliciously the while, promptly obeyed, merely pausing to inform his candid hostess:

"I'll git even with you-all, yit! You jest watch out and see!"

So far nothing had come of the threat, but the few cattlemen to whom the incident had been related had cautioned Mr. Carrol to keep a close watch on his stock.

Unknown to the Carrols, Mr. Ham Hardy was one of the distinctly bad men of the territory. Those who knew of his general character declared that it was no part of his policy to undertake any honest work. He had been, so they declared, merely studying the situation, and whatever knowledge he had acquired was sure to be turned to some evil account in the future.

On ascertaining the identity of the man with the coffee pot, Rupert, who was much too near to be safe, since the fog might lift at any instant, leaving him standing in the full glory of the moonlight with not so much as a mesquite shrub to conceal himself behind, had begun a rapid retreat, or, rather, detour. His ultimate object was to gain the brink of the sheer wall above the fire where Ham was boiling his coffee.

Mrs. Easton, with her usual clear-sightedness, had hit the nail on the head, and the hit, as Rupert was soon to learn, still rankled. Ham was addicted to the use of his villainous tobacco and yet more villainous coffee as a drunkard is to his whisky, and he seldom lost an opportunity to indulge in either, or both, of them. If he could, undiscovered, gain this vantage-point, Rupert knew that he would be able to overhear whatever passed between them, and it seemed to him, at the moment, of paramount importance that he should learn what took such a doubtful character as Mr. Hardy—and, he had no doubt, since he was with Mr. Hardy, his companion—out on a night excursion like this.

As he hurried away he recalled the incident of the breakfast table and the carefully veiled opinion that its recital had elicited among the cattlemen, that Mr. Hardy's real occupation in life was that of stealing horses and cattle, and that he was an adept in this line of work.

Certainly, as his father had said, there were horse and cattle thieves about. Perhaps, Rupert thought, as, having made the detour, he crept softly, very softly, to the top of the mesa wall, he would soon be able to learn from Mr. Hardy's own lips just how correct the general opinion in regard to him was.

The man whom Rupert mentally designated, because of the manner in which he had been engaged when Rupert first caught sight of him, "The Sleepy One," was still grumbling. That was the first thing that Rupert learned as, having gained the position that he coveted, he stretched himself flat on his stomach but a precariously few feet above the two men.

"I reckon," the grumbler was insisting, "that my hearin's as good as yours, and I didn't hear no horse's been a-comin'."

"One reason for that is that you was asleep as usual," returned Hardy. "I heard one comin', and that's enough. It might 've been a stray animal wanderin' by his lonesome. But—I dunno why he'd be comin'. No, I don't know why he'd be comin'," the observation was added musingly and apparently addressed to the fire.

The other man took it up sharply: "Well, if you did hear anything, and I say again I didn't—"

"I did, you was asleep until I woke you up."

"Looks to me as if it was a sight more sensible for to try to get a little sleep, if we're to try that back trail over Mexico, than to spend three or four hours of warm in twilin' cuffee. Besides that, if there was any sort around here it prob'ly took fright at your fire. I made myself it's plumb near criminal to advertise our whereabouts when we've got the work before us that we have, and when we know what a howl there'll be about it all to-morrow."

"Don't fret yourself about that little punch of fire, Bill. But you ain't worryin' about that—you're mad because I woke you up, that's what ails you."

"No, I ain't; but I do hate sittin' around this way, doin' nothin', not even sleepin'. Besides, I've got a hunch that we ain't goin' to get that mare of Carrol's. It's a big risk, she's too all-fired conspicuous, anyway. A white mare like that! A man with sharp eyes could spot her for a hundred miles pretty right. We've got two good ones already. My idee is that we'd better be satisfied with them this trip and leave Carrol's mare till next time."

"What'd be the object in waitin' till next time? I've waited a full year already on that mare. It's just a year now since I hired out to help Carrol on the round-up—" Mr. Hardy paused to chuckle with reminiscent pleasure, and then went on: "I got the lay of the land all right, all right, but I seem right off that the mare wasn't fair developed yit.

"I 'lowed that she needed jest about a year more to come to her full strength and beauty, and I knew it would be all right to leave her with old man Carrol. He is plumb stuck on her, and he's taken good care of her. Only thing I was afraid of was that he might sell her. I think now that he may—if he has the chance to keep her, which he ain't goin' to have no longer—because he's too mean and stingy to understand the value of such a critter, anyway. Say, Bill, she's worth a fortune—fast and handsome! Well, I should reckon—but Carrol don't know it—she's worth a thousand of any man's money, and I'd be willing to bet half of it that he'd think he'd done a big thing if he sold her for half of that half."

"Well, we ain't got her yit," growled the "Sleepy One."

"We're a-goin' to get her. As I said above I've got the habits of the family down pat, and I can rush this thing through straight. The only one of the bunch that's like to make trouble is that cub they call Rupert. He's like his old grandmother. Blast her!—too sharp for his years."

CHAPTER XII.

A VANISHED SNOWFLAKE.

"THAT cub that they call Rupert," from his station above the two men, could not restrain an involuntary start at this peculiar reference to himself. The movement, slight as it was, served to dislodge a fragment of earth from the crumbling bank, and it went rolling down beside the men.

Hardy sprang to his feet. "What was that?" he demanded.

Rupert could not avoid noting, as an involuntary expression of the man's cool-

ness, that he, though plainly startled, carefully lifted the coffee pot as he sprang, thereby losing none of its precious contents.

Bill glanced up at the overhanging wall above them. "I reckon the fog's loosened a bit of the earth; it's always crumbling."

It was. Rupert realized this and resolved to make his retreat as soon as the attention of the men was attracted from it. This was speedily done. Ham Hardy drew a watch from the pocket of his rough overalls, and, leaning down over the fire, consulted it.

"It's goin' on after eleven now. The Carrol outfit will be sleepin' sound as so many logs by this time. 'Early to bed an' early to rise'—that's the motter of them kind of folks. We'll be there at jest the right time if we start now. Lucky they ain't got no dog. I settled that business for them six weeks ago, and the old man's been too obstinate to git another. Lucky fer the dog he didn't git, too, fer I kept a dose of the same stuff that fixed the first one on hand fer any other that he might git. Soon's I drink my coffee we'll start; we'll ride slow."

Only waiting until Ham was fully occupied in drinking the coffee—which, to judge from the exclamations that accompanied the act, must have been unpleasantly hot—Rupert crept softly away, wriggling along on his stomach until sure that it would be safe to get to his feet, and even then walking very softly for a few yards farther before he reckoned it safe to break into a run. Reaching Snowflake's side, he mounted, and struck off at a swift gallop straight away from the vicinity of the 7-H roadway—if, indeed, he had been near it. His first object was to get well beyond possible sight or pursuit. Of his being seen he felt assured that there was little danger—in fact, no danger whatever; and as to being pursued—how, he asked himself, gleefully, could he be pursued if he had been neither heard nor seen?

After some minutes of rapid riding, Rupert checked his horse and listened. Not the slightest sound of life broke the silence, and, satisfied, he started on again, but at a much slower pace, mentally questioning himself. Ought he to return home and warn his father of the impending robbery? And, apart from revealing his own disobedience—a disobedience that, as yet, had not accomplished its purpose—what good would that do? The thieves could not get the mare if she was not in the stable, while if he now returned and put her in her usual place they might yet—Rupert found it extremely hard to convince himself of this, after the enlightenment that he had just received—manage to get her.

In the end Rupert succeeded in lamely congratulating himself upon having taken Snowflake from the stable and out of danger at such a critical juncture. He tried hard, also, to convince himself that it was now almost a duty for him to finish the trip as he had first planned it.

It was a piece of pure good fortune that he had been enabled to learn the intentions of the thieves on the morrow. What steps could he take on the morrow, since he could not well tell his father that she was in danger, to render Snowflake any safer?

With a shrug of his shoulders, Rupert finally dismissed this perplexing question, and, suddenly remembering that there was a short cut over the mesa to the 7-H, turned Snowflake's head in that direction. Confident, as an older and more experienced person would not have been, of his ability to keep the right trail, Rupert again allowed the fast mare to go at top speed, unchecked, almost unwatched.

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It was nearly morning when Mrs. Easton was awakened by an odd sound. Not a loud sound, but so unusual that it had power to arouse her as a far louder, familiar sound could not have done. She sat up in bed, listening anxiously. The next

instant she was on her feet and pattering, barefoot, across the floor to Rupert's room.

"Either that boy has got an amazin' attackt of nightmares, or he's a-cryin' in his sleep!" she thought excitedly. "And, either way, he needs wakin' up."

Reaching the boy's bedside, however, she found him lying perfectly quiet, and decided that, if he had been beset by nightmares, they had now taken flight. She forebore to arouse him, but contented herself with tucking the bedclothes more closely around his shoulders. Then she turned away, only to stumble and nearly fall over a little heap of clothing on the floor. Mentally reciting some of the things that she would say to Rupert when he awakened, as to his carelessness in leaving his clothing lying around in such untidy fashion, she went back to her bed and to sleep.

But Rupert was awake, and his pillow was already wet with unavailing tears. After his grandmother's visit he stifled his sobs, and, growing calmer, at last fell asleep, only to find that sleep was worse than waking. In his sleep he seemed to be continually falling—falling—at the same time that he was striving, in dumb terror, to keep from being crushed by some other falling body that slid, struggling, beyond him, on, and down, down into unknown depths.

The slight noise that Cosme, the first one up, made in coming downstairs, awoke him again. He opened his heavy eyes and looked around. Day was breaking. The growing light showed him the clothes that he had donned a few hours before, lying in a disorderly fashion on the floor. He sprang up, and, dressing quickly, picked up the Sunday suit and began hanging it in its place in the closet; some white hairs on the trousers legs caught his eye. He carried the garment to the window, and, by the insufficient light, brushed it as well as he could, thinking the while that now he knew how a murderer must feel while trying to conceal the evidence of his crime. Much as he dreaded to face the moment that he knew was fast approaching, he dared not linger in the bedroom. He went out into the kitchen where his grandmother was preparing breakfast, replying mechanically to her morning greeting, not a word of which he had understood. His head was so hot, there was such a ringing in his ears, his heart felt so like a leaden weight in his breast, that he understood nothing save that he was waiting for something that was coming, that was close at hand, when Cosme put his head in at the door.

"Oh, at las' you was up!" exclaimed the Mexican, who prided himself on his habits of early rising.

"What if I am up, or not up? What business is it of yours?" returned Rupert, crossly.

"It don't make not anything at me, whether yo' gits up in the daytimes, or gits up not at all," replied Cosme, cross in his turn; "but the barn door was lock', an' yo' padre he have the key."

"Oh, yes; I'll get it for you." Rupert turned away quickly, feeling a wave of crimson rush over his face. Stepping softly into his father's room, he took down the key that he had, on the previous evening, hung on the nail at the foot of his father's bed, slipped it into his pocket, and, taking therefrom the right key, went back to the kitchen and tendered it to Cosme. Then, as Cosme started for the barn, he leaned against the sink, too unnerved for the moment to stand upright and face the thing that was surely coming—that came, as Cosme reopened the door, his black eyes glinting with excitement.

"Hola, Rupert! 'At Snowflake! Was she at her stall las' night?"

"Yes."

"Vive Dios! She was not at it now—she was gone!"

"I reckon not," returned Rupert, his courage beginning to revive, now that the crisis had come. "Probably you don't see straight."

"Yo' go look all over 'at stall—all over all 'at stalls, si—then yo' see. No alba Snowflake was there; yo' go see."

"Nonsense!" reiterated Rupert, with stiffening lips, but making no movement toward an investigation.

Nora, who had been assisting about the breakfast, was already gone, however; she came running back at this moment and added her testimony to Cosme's. "She is gone, Rupert; perhaps she has broken out some way."

"That may be," said Rupert, catching at the idea eagerly.

"If she's not in her stall she's been stolen!" called the father, sharply, from his room, where he was dressing in tremulous haste. He now hobbled out and joined the excited little group. "I've always been expecting that this would happen!" he declared. "It's just some more of your carelessness, Rupert; you didn't lock the door last night."

Rupert said nothing; he was willing to let it go at that. But Cosme had testimony to offer on that point also. "The door, she was lock' this morning; me, myself, I unlock it but now. I look, I call—all other horse there but alba Snowflake."

"Of course," said his master, irritably. "What would any thief in his senses want of any other horse if he could steal Snowflake?"

Cosme nodded his head in solemn assent to this proposition, and Mr. Carrol went on: "They picked the lock, I reckon; it's a spring padlock, and all they'd have to do, after picking it and getting the horse, would be to snap it on to the staple again."

This was, in effect, exactly what Hardy and Bill had done on opening the door and finding their prize was not there. Deciding at once that the fact that the mare was not in her usual place did not necessarily prove that she would not be there another time, the two thieves had carefully replaced the lock as they had found it, and rode away, resolved to make sure, another time, that the coveted animal was within the building before taking the trouble to pick the lock.

Accompanied by the entire family, Mr. Carrol made his slow way out to the barn, intent upon a careful search of the premises. "Maybe we can find the rascals' tracks," he said. "If we can do that it may give us some clue." And an instant after he called sharply to Rupert: "What are you doing? If you haven't been shuffling your feet in the sand there by the door! The place of all others where the fellow would be likely to leave tracks! Well, I swan! If you don't beat anything I ever saw! You'd make a good detective; they ought to have you on the force in some city," he continued, in bitter sarcasm. "It wouldn't cost the state much to board its criminals as long as they had you to help catch 'em."

But now came a cry from Cosme, who had walked a few paces away from the door. "Here was some track; tres, cuatro, cinco, seis—si, seis; no more at all but seis; also the tracks of one horse. This, it was where the thief git on Snowflake's back!" he concluded, triumphantly.

Mr. Carrol went over and inspected the tracks carefully. After a moment's study he drew a long breath, saying: "You're right, Cosme; whoever took her rode her away. Possibly he took a saddle, too."

Nora had already thought of that; she now announced that all of the saddles were in their places, and such proved to be the case, as Mr. Carrol found on looking for himself. As they were returning to the house, Mr. Carrol said:

"Saddle up as soon as you have had your breakfast, Cosme, and ride down to Pinos Altos, to notify the sheriff. It's his business to catch horse thieves. But I'll give fifty dollars to anyone who finds Snowflake. I'd give more if I had it to give; I'd be safe enough in offering 'most anything, though, for I don't think anyone will ever claim the reward. Whoever has taken Snowflake had his plans all laid; he'll

probably run her over into Mexico, and when she's once there she's the same as dead to us. The Mexicans ain't hurting themselves to help Americans catch horse thieves in their country."

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CHAPTER XIII.

Nora Finds Some White Hairs.

THE family, coming in from the search for traces of the thief, or thieves, who had taken the white mare, gathered at the breakfast table, but, in the midst of the general excitement, Rupert neither ate nor spoke.

One member of the family alone noted this fact. That one was Nora.

When Cosme had gone, bearing instructions to spread the tidings of the mare's disappearance as far and as fast as possible, Mr. Carrol turned wearily to his son:

"You'd better ride down to the cañon, Rupert, and see that those steers are all right. They're the best we've got, and it wouldn't surprise me if they'd been lifted, too. We shall have to put on a night guard, I'm afraid. We might as well bankrupt ourselves paying guards as to sit still and let the rustlers take all we've got. If the steers are all right we won't put on the guards just yet, though. It may be only horses that the thieves are taking, and they've got the best one that we shall ever have, already."

Rupert turned away without comment. He was glad of employment, and doubly glad to be alone. Riding to the point designated, he found the cattle safe, as he had every reason to expect that they would be, and, dismounting, he left his pony free to graze at will, while in an abandon of despair he threw himself on the ground that he wished might open and cover him from sight. It seemed to him at the moment that he could never be a happy, careless boy again, never know the restfulness of dreamless sleep; yet, before very long, he was unconscious that the watchful pony came and sniffed inquiringly at the brown head lying so low in the grass, or that the grazing cattle, chancing to come near, started back in affright at sight of the motionless herder.

The sun was well past the meridian when he awoke. Vidette, with perhaps some vague recognition of her master's misery, was close at hand, but the cattle had strayed so far that it took some time to round them up.

When that was done it was time to return home, and so the dreadful day was done. He found Cosme at home before him. Cosme reported that the sheriff had taken the description of the lost mare, which, together with the intelligence of the promised reward, was to be scattered far and wide throughout the cattle country.

"Also he say, 'at sheriff, 'at it was not yo' who was alone in losin' something. That Señor Sanford, who have the fas' horse, las' night he los' two of them. The sheriff say this country it was gittin' so hot, somebody got to hang pretty soon. Also Señor Sanford he have offer one big rewar' for to fin' the thiefs what took his horses; an' also the county, it offer rewar' for fin' 'em. Make one big fortune for 'at somebody what fin's 'at thiefs! The sheriff he have gone with a small lot of men ridin' down the road w'at leads to Mexican border." Cosme concluded his recital with the words: "He think, 'at sheriff, 'at we goin' git Snowflake agin. He say she too well known—too easy for to foller, 'count of her color, for 'em to git away with her."

"I hope he's right," said Mr. Carrol. "But I don't think he is. Whoever took Snowflake made sure of its being a successful steal before he tried it on."

"I tole him, me," Cosme went on, proudly, "'at he mus' be lookin' for some small-size thief; the man w'at stole alba Snowflake, he got small-size feet—mos' small as mine." Cosme had the slender, delicate foot of his race; he advanced one of these

members now and looked at it approvingly as he remarked, "Mos' small's mine, it was."

Rupert, who was present, was not even thrilled by Cosme's words. He had already been through so much that his capacity for suffering seemed dulled, but, glancing up suddenly, as Cosme finished his story, he was startled and shocked by the glimpse that he caught of Nora's quickly averted face. What ailed Nora? Did she grieve so over the loss of the mare? Or—why should she avert her face from him, and why should she look so terrified, so apprehensive?

With a recklessness born of utter despair, Rupert determined to know. Nora left the room soon afterward to attend to her little flock of poultry, and Rupert followed her. When they were out of earshot from the house he began at once:

"You think a lot of 'alba Snowflake,' as that fool Cosme calls her, don't you, Nora?" he asked, in a voice full of pain and bitterness.

"Yes, I do—or did," returned Nora, steadily, although the color forsook her face.

"Why do you say 'did'? Don't you think anything of her now?"

"Am I my brother's keeper? Am I my brother's keeper?" The words seemed sounding in her ears, now near, now far off; now low and soft, now loud and terrible, in their commanding suggestiveness.

"Yes," she said aloud, in a clear voice, and with an involuntary upward movement of her trembling hands—a movement such as hands that were clinging blindly to a cross might make. Her heart had answered the question that, to her vivid imagination seemed, just then, to fill all space.

But Rupert took the answer differently. "Why did you say *did,* then?" he repeated.

"Because"—she looked in his face, hesitated, and concluded lamely: "Grandma says, 'What is past, is past; let it rest.'"

"That's very pretty, or would be, if one knew what you were talking about. Best thing you can do with some objects is just to let them alone. Say a dead dog, for instance; but when it comes to a stolen horse—"

"Or a dead one," interposed his sister, in a quiet voice. Her face gleamed white in the gathering dusk. Rupert looked at her, but he did not speak, and she went on in a tone so low that he bent his head to catch the words. "You know, Rupert dear, I was the first one, after Cosme, to go to the barn this morning. I thought of the saddles right off, and looked for them. When I came to father's, I—I found the saddle blanket lined—quite lined—with white hairs; it was lying on the saddle, and father had used the bay colt last. Snowflake is shedding her coat. I've heard father say that he looks as though he'd been out in a snowstorm every time he rides her lately. I—I shook the blanket and turned it the other side out before Cosme came up—and—I know that De Vargas plays so well—and Vidette was tired—and Snowflake had been doing nothing. Afterward, when I was making your bed, there were white hairs—oh, so many of them—on the carpet, and your—your Sunday clothes—" She broke down suddenly, and, leaning against the corral fence, covered her face with her hands and sobbed aloud.

Rupert continued to stare at her like one stunned for a breathless instant, then: "I see what you are up to," he said, harshly. "You mean to tell father. All right, tell him—just tell him your mean, sneaking suspicions. What proof have you got to support them? Some white hairs! Didn't I take care of all the horses yesterday? But I wouldn't have believed that *you'd* turn against me," he continued, his lips quivering. "It's all right, though, if you feel like it; don't hesitate on my account. Just tell father all that you think you know; make the most of it, for it's the last chance you'll ever have to tell anything

about me." He threw out his arms with a passionate gesture—in which, however, there was no suggestion of clinging to a cross—and concluded bitterly: "I haven't a friend on earth, not one; and I don't care, either—only, I wouldn't have—thought that you'd go back on—on—me, Nora." He turned, and was striding away in the direction of the highway, when Nora sprang to his side. She caught his hand, and, when he tried to shake her off, held on with all her strength.

"Wait!" she implored, breathlessly. "Wait!" As the boy, angry and humiliated, still tried to wrench away his hand, she moaned: "Rupert, Rupert, Rupert! I shall die if you leave me!" In her anguish she sank down on her knees before him, and her forehead was smirched with the gray dust of the roadway. Her brother's keeper! If he fled from home in his present mood—mad with shame and remorse, feeling, too, that she, in whom he most trusted, had failed him in his need—what calamity worse than death might not his recklessness lead him into? She knelt in the dust before him, clinging to his knees and crying abjectly.

"Get up, Eleanor," he said at last, in a husky voice. "Don't cry any more; I won't go away." He did not add, "I will tell the truth."

Nora got up; she laid her two hands on his shoulders, looking up into the face that was a trifle above her own. "I haven't asked you any questions, Rupert," she said, earnestly, "and I will not ask any. When the time comes, if there is anything that you ought to tell, I know that you will tell it. But, oh, Rupert! do not think, no matter what comes up, that I will say anything against you. Oh, if you knew how it hurts me to hear you say that no one cares for you, when I—when I—" She broke down again.

"I say such things because I'm so hateful that I don't see how anyone can care for me," Rupert confessed, miserably.

"That's a pretty big mistake," Nora returned, with a forlorn little smile. Her hands fell away from his shoulders, and she went about attending to the wants of the chickens that, a motley crew in various stages of development, were flocking after her.

Rupert stood in his place and watched her a moment; then, with his back turned, "It was an accident," he said, in a hushed voice.

Nora nodded; the cross to which she had seemed but now to be clinging was already pressing heavily upon her shoulders.

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CHAPTER XIV.

Mrs. Easton Bemoans the Loss of Snowflake.

AFTER a few days the little household settled down as nearly as might be, under existing circumstances, to the usual routine, but, of course, there was a difference.

The head of the house, held prisoner by his injured ankle, fretted ceaselessly at his enforced inactivity, while Rupert, never rugged, was daily growing paler and thinner. In spite of this, however, he was attending to the range work, all of which now devolved upon him, with an anxious solicitude that he had never before displayed. His father, observing this, began to question, inwardly, if he had not been mistaken about his son—perhaps, after all, the boy was entitled to more credit than he had been giving him. But it was a part of the general misunderstanding between the two that it never occurred to Mr. Carrol to speak a word of praise or commendation.

Rupert, sometimes dwelling with bitterness upon his father's tendency to find fault with him, was wont to paraphrase a line once written in description of the character of Lincoln: "Oh, quick to praise and slow to blame!" Only, unhappily, Rupert felt

In her anguish she sank on her knees before him.

that the description best fitted his father when it was reversed.

Cosme, as he respectfully intimated on more than one occasion, would have been glad to assist in the search for the mare, but, to his secret disgust, was set to work at the spring plowing, instead.

Mr. Carrol chafed at being kept idly at home when he was so much needed in a half-dozen other places; he was sure, for one thing, that if he had been searching for the stolen mare, he would have found her, or tidings of her, before three days were past. He was repeating this statement for the twentieth time, one day, when, to his unconcealed astonishment, Mrs. Easton, who had heard the words often enough before, without being visibly affected, sat down, and, burying her face in her apron, burst into tears.

Although touched by this display of affection for his lost pet, Mr. Carrol was also vaguely irritated by its utter uselessness.

"I don't know as there's any use in crying about it," he observed, at length, as his mother-in-law continued to sob. "She's gone, and there's no help for it, as far as I can see."

Now it might have been noted of Mrs. Easton, if anyone had ever taken the trouble to reflect on the subject, that she seldom wasted her ammunition; in other words, when she felt moved to give a dramatic lecture, or a symbolical exposition of any theme that interested her, she liked to have her little audience all on hand. On this occasion Rupert and Nora were both present, as she made sure by peeping furtively out from the corner of her apron, before she responded, sighing:

"Yes, James, them are true words, and sad ones. What does Mr. Watts say—to be sure, he was speakin' of a man, but it amounts to the same thing—'she was a mare; take her for all in all, we ne'er shall see her like again!' And such a beautiful critter, too, and so affectionate, and so gentle—except when she got mad—and fast! Them razor-back hogs that we used to know of, down in Texas, that they called wind-splitters, wasn't a circumstance to her when she got fairly started. Snowflake! It's a pretty name, too, but I wouldn't wonder if it was a unfort'nate one. Snowflakes melt. So has she as far as we can make out, and we are left like Rachael, mournin' for her children and refusin' to be comforted."

"There's no use in taking it to heart that way," remonstrated her son-in-law, in a voice that was but little better than a growl. He had an uneasy apprehension that his astute mother-in-law was, in some way, laying a trap for him.

Mrs. Easton put down her apron and stared at him in amazement. "'Bid the stricken deer go weep, the hart ungalled play,'" she murmured, reproachfully, and then: "I don't want to as much as intimate, James, that you are wantin' in affection for that mare, but your words do have that kind of a sound to me. Why, what will become of us if she ain't found! Mr. Watts says, speakin' of the Goddess of Liberty, 'I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided,' he says. Regardin' this family, the lamp by which their feet was guided, appears to 'a' been that mare. Now she's gone out, and what is the consequence? Here you be, frettin' and worryin' to that extent, James, that, if it was my last words, I must say it: your words are like nothin' more nor less than a bunch of them sputterin' firecrackers, and all a body has to do to set 'em off, is to speak of that mare, and they go fizz! all at once. You refuse to be comforted; you can't see no good in nothin' any more. Now here's Rupert: some folks might think—they reely might, James—that he in his way—which is a diffrunt one, I ain't denyin' that—is almost as beautiful a critter, and worth as much concern, as that four-legged mare. Well—you set still, Rupert," she commanded, as the boy made an uneasy movement, as if meditating escape. "He's gettin' as thin as a shadder,

and as white as a sheet; he don't eat enough to keep a plains sparrer alive since the mare was took. Nobody, save and exceptin' his old grandma, has any eyes for him; other eyes are a-searchin' the earth for tracks of that mare's hoofs by day, and the sky for traces of her spirit by night. And Nora? I'd like to ask any of you what would become of this family without Nora! Yet, here she is, a-taggin' along in Rupert's footsteps, still and white and a-startin' at every sound, like a hunted maverick. So I say again, Lord grant that we may learn the fate of that mare soon, or this family will grieve itself off the face of the earth. Scripture says, 'Make not to yourselves idols of wood, or of brass,' and I guess it mentions a few other animals, but it don't say nothin' about horses. So, James, we'll go right on mournin' for the mare, and makin' ourselves, and everybody that comes nigh us, just as miserable as we can, 'for 'tis our nature to,' and I do presume to say that we all of us furnish an interestin' spectacle to that Cosme, who keeps his weather eye on us, indoors and out, and blinks world without end," she concluded, out of breath, and got up hastily to shoo out an intrusive chicken that had ventured to strut in at the open doorway.

As she disappeared Mr. Carrol turned to his son and regarded him attentively. "You don't look very well, Rupert; your grandmother is right—and you, too, Nora. I hope it isn't as she thinks—just the loss of the mare that is troubling you?" There was a hint of anxiety in his voice.

Rupert, staring steadily out of the window, said nothing. Nora felt that the burden of responsibility for an answer rested with her.

"I—don't people often get kind of run down in the spring, father? I guess I have been kind of dull lately on account of the weather. Maybe Rupert feels it, too," with a wistful glance in his direction, and a hope of accounting for his changed looks on the same general ground.

"Well," returned her father, evidently dissatisfied with this explanation, "I never supposed that children brought up as you have been, out of doors in all weathers, from babyhood up, could get run down in this style, just because winter's gone and summer's coming. You'll soon need a pair of band-boxes to live in at this rate. As for Snowflake," he went on, in a changed voice, "maybe I have seemed to care an uncommon lot about her, and to feel her loss more than I ought to. Your grandmother is generally right about such things, but it isn't altogether on account of Snowflake herself that I feel the loss. To tell the truth," he added, hesitating, the confession evidently at war with his usual secretive habit, "I had decided to sell her."

"To sell her!" echoed both his listeners, dismayed.

"Yes, to sell her," Mr. Carrol repeated; "that man that was up from Santa Fé last month offered me three hundred dollars for her. I didn't say then that I'd let him have her—it was hard for me to make up my mind to part with her—but I told him to call on his way back, and I'd give a definite answer. He was on his way to Denver, and he's due back next week. I had decided to let him have her; it's too risky, as we've found out to our cost, for us to try to keep so valuable an animal."

"But," interposed Nora, "you are so fond of her."

"Yes," her father assented, "but I'm fond of something besides her, too." His glance at Rupert emphasized the remark. Rupert, with his eyes fixed determinedly on the view outside the window, did not see the look, and his father, as if already half repenting the tacit admission of affection for him, went on gloomily: "There's no use in talking of all that now. The horse is gone, and three hundred dollars with her; the spring work is behindhand; I'm crippled, you both getting peaked; your grandmother crying, and nobody up to time except Cosme—not," he continued, his

sense of justice stirring suddenly, "but what you're doing the best you can lately, Rupert—I ain't making any complaint of the way you're handling the cattle, the last few days—but there ought to be two hands on the range all the time now."

"Oh, I reckon I can manage well enough alone," Rupert replied.

His voice sounded so lifeless and weary that his father looked at him solicitously.

"I don't know—you do appear to be pretty well run down," he said, slowly; "kind of odd that I hadn't noticed it before."

"And now, thanks to grandma, you won't notice anything else," thought the boy, ungratefully.

He was mistaken. Mr. Carrol did not seem to be watching him particularly as the days went by. He took to thinking instead, which was infinitely more dangerous, for he had presently traced the starting point of Rupert's altered looks and silent ways back to the night that the mare was stolen. Yet he had never really cared so much for the handsome animal as for his own homely little cow-pony, Vidette; he would miss Vidette, if she should disappear, and grieve for her, probably, but his father did not believe that her disappearance would affect his health as the loss of Snowflake appeared to have done. And Nora? Mr. Carrol was suddenly reminded at this point in his cogitations of one of Mrs. Easton's oft-repeated quotations—credited, of course, to the versatile Mr. Watts: "True hearts are more than coronets, and simple faith than Norman blood." "If there's a true heart on earth," mused Nora's father, "it's Nora's, and whatever affects her brother affects her, of course; and whatever affects either of them affects me—but I reckon they're too young to understand that. For the present I'll keep that reward standing, and, for the rest, I'll wait—I'll wait."

CHAPTER XV.

Cosme Brings News from Pinos Altos.

ON THE same day that the disappearance of the famous white mare of the Carrols' was being circulated throughout the country, Valdez, senior, the father of Cosme, presented himself at the store where Cosme had but the day before purchased a wagon load of supplies.

Valdez was a good customer, so the grocer shrewdly bided his time. It was not until the Mexican was slowly strapping up his depleted leather wallet that the tradesman remarked, affably:

"You must be going out on a long trip, this time. This makes—lemme see—five 'n' five's ten—'n' ten's twenty—yes, thirty-five dollars' worth of stuff that you've bought in the last two days. Goin' into Mexico?"

"No," returned Valdez, shortly, and added:

"Me? I was have bought but fifteen dolla' of stuff."

"That's to-day? Oh, yes, of course, it's all right. I hope you don't think I mentioned it because I wanted the pay. I don't. You can have all the time you ask from this house, now I tell you. But I was thinking of the twenty dollars' worth that Cosme got for you, yesterday."

"Let me see that twenty dolla' of Cosme," said Cosme's father.

He examined the bill that the merchant brought him, going over each item carefully, although he could not read a word of English, and, when told what Cosme had said, paid it without a word. But his eyes burned and his grizzled mustache seemed to to bristle.

The storekeeper watched him thoughtfully. "That little rascal of a Mexican's been piling up trouble for himself, I shouldn't wonder," was his mental comment, as Valdez, looking neither to the right nor left, walked steadily out of the store.

Certainly it was an evil day for Cosme.

On the street his father met an acquaintance who made haste to tell him that, on the day before, he had seen Cosme, although Cosme had not known of his presence, being, at the moment, absorbed in betting on the wheel of fortune. Cosme's father, having the fortunate gift of silence, made no comment on this intelligence, but there was no occasion for reticence with himself, and, driving homeward, he often looked speculatively at the tall stalks of cane cactus growing thick and rank in isolated patches. He thought how the Penitentes, of which savage sect he was a member, lashed themselves with the stinging thorns, and reflected complacently on the good that it did them.

"I makes 'at boy to rememb' dis time," he muttered. "I makes him to carry some scar. I teaches him to make up lies at me, si. I teaches him to gamble! W'en I gits back from dis roun'-up, we see!"

The search for the lost mare was pushed so far—they were all so sure that she had been stolen and ridden away at speed—that Rupert, who alone could have told where she was lying dead, began to breathe more easily. He did not despise himself any the less, and, in his heart, longed to go to his father with the truth. The longer he delayed the harder the task became, until his morbid dread of his father's merciless reproaches grew into a shrinking terror. It seemed to him that it would be easier to be condemned as a horse thief than to listen to what his father might, with good reason, say to him.

Nearly three weeks slipped by. Mr. Carrol, whose hurt had proved to be of a much more serious character than the doctor—in the hasty examination that the victim would tolerate, and that for the one occasion only—had diagnosed, was yet hobbling about the premises on crutches, so that, as Rupert could not be spared from the range work, Cosme was again sent to Pinos Altos for supplies.

Rupert, knowing the young Mexican for the treacherous soul that he was, had, when he heard the matter mentioned, a momentary impulse to protest against it, but, along with the numbing sense of misery that had been his since he entered upon those days and weeks of deceit, there had grown a distrust of himself—a distrust sadly at variance with his usual gallant independence of speech and action. Cosme started early, as always on these expeditions, and Rupert saw him depart with his mental protest unspoken. What had Cosme done, or what could he do, Rupert's guilty conscience mocked, that was as bad as the thing that he himself had achieved?

As it happened, Cosme reached the village just as an event of such importance to the community was taking place that the young Mexican was sufficiently entertained, during the few hours of his stay, without having recourse to any projects of his own.

It was nearly dusk when he drove into the ranch house yard on his return next day. As on the previous occasion, Mr. Carrol directed him to fetch his purchases into the kitchen, while he checked them off.

Cosme, with difficulty holding back his great news, waited until the business in hand was disposed of. When the last article on the list was satisfactorily accounted for, his employer said:

"You've done everything all right, Cosme, very well, indeed!"—as, indeed, he had, since Cosme was by no means lacking in intelligence and adaptability when he chose to turn either to account.

"Me," returned Cosme, beaming, "it was mos' won'erful 'at I make 'at job all right, with no mistake at all, same like yo' say, señor, because I was full of excite' in 'at town yes'erday. Almos' after the things they was all bought, I was afraid, me, to camp for the night like w'at yo' tole me for to do, 'bout a mile out on the road back to the ranch, an' wait, like Señora Easton"—with a respectful inclination of his head in that lady's direction—"say, 'till daylight doth appear.'"

"Very dangerous, I should say, camping on the Pinos Altos road, on your way home!" commented his employer, dryly. "But since you have got back all right, you'd better look after the horses now, and then come in and get your supper."

The family had just finished the evening meal when Cosme drove up, so that all the members of the household were present, to Cosme's satisfaction, as he gently protested, in reply to this suggestion:

"Si, me? I was full of hungry, also the horses, but I would explain to the señor that it was not 'at I was afraid of gettin' hurt at the camp. No, it was the excite'. I was full of excite'. Pinos Altos, she was also full—all of her!" Cosme, who had been holding his peaked straw hat in one hand since his entry into the kitchen, now waved that useful article of wearing apparel dramatically, the better to illustrate how very full Pinos Altos was of the "excite'" that had so affected him.

Mr. Carrol, seeing that the young Mexican really had something to tell, adjured him, bluntly:

"Well, what was the matter with Pinos Altos? Out with it!"

"The thiefs, señor—the thiefs w'at have been makin' such big steals of horses, and also cattles. No more will they steal. The sheriff he have got them both. He have brought them to Pinos Altos and put them into the strong house of iron."

"W-h-e-w! That is news, indeed! So the sheriff got the thieves, or some of them. Did you learn who the men were?"

"Si; one, he was 'at Hardy man—Señor Ham Hardy, he was. The other he was name Billium—Señor Billium."

"Billium?" Mr. Carrol repeated the name thoughtfully. "I don't recollect ever hearing that name in this part of the country before."

Cosme, always polite, hesitated. "Si; there is a possible 'at I have made mistake in the name, me. At Pinos Altos always they call him Bill. Long time ago my padre tell me 'at Will, w'en he was a front name, he stood for William, and so I think, me—"

In spite of himself, Mr. Carrol laughed. "I see. You carried the idea out when it came to Bill. Well, have they recovered any of the stolen horses?"

"Si; also the sheriff said to him—so my hermano, who lives at Pinos Altos, tole me—and it was of a gen'ral voice among the people 'at the sheriff had tole it to them—"

"Well, well, well! Take that for granted! Did they get any of the stolen stock back?"

"They tole the sheriff, w'en he tole them that the peoples would hang them, sure, if they didn't own up, w'ere they had taken Señor Sanford's horses to, in Mexico, and sole them to a man w'at keeps horses to go fas' on a racetrack. 'At sheriff, at once he said he would go down to 'at place and bring them horses back."

"I don't know that he can. The law in Mexico—" Mr. Carrol dropped the speculation with an impatient gesture. "Did you hear anything about Snowflake?"

"Me, I hear it say—and Señor Billium and Señor Ham Hardy both swear it hard at the sheriff—'at they did not get Snowflake. 'At sheriff he say some other members of the gang have tooken Snowflake."

"It's rather odd, though, that she should have disappeared on the same night that the others were taken, if she was taken by another party."

"Si, it was 'at w'at the sheriff say, too."

"I'm glad that they've got the men. Sanford offered a big reward for the recovery of his horses. If the sheriff succeeds in getting them back the reward will go to him."

Rupert, sitting silent and unnoticed in his corner, felt a sick loathing of himself at the words. Nearly a month ago he had known who it was that had stolen the Sanford racehorses. If, he reflected, he had been a better neighbor and less of a

coward, he would have gone to Mr. Sanford and told him, thus saving him, as well as the county, several hundred dollars of expense; still, his accusing conscience ran on, what difference could it make how he treated his neighbor, or what sort of a citizen he was, seeing the sort of son and brother that he had turned out to be?

He was roused from his tormenting reflections by his father's voice again addressing Cosme, who had once more ventured to hint that now was the time for him (Cosme) to turn in and assist the sheriff in the search for the lost Snowflake.

"No, I reckon not," Mr. Carrol returned, decisively, in response to the respectfully-worded hint. "You just attend to your business—which is the farm work, just now—and leave the sheriff to attend to his."

"'At sheriff he have to wear one small window on his eye," remarked Cosme.

"Wears glasses. Well, what of that?"

"He no have eye 'at see 'way off, like mine."

"His eyes seem to serve his purpose pretty well. You attend to your work in the west field. You'll find plenty of employment for your eyes up there."

"Si, 'at was a good place to see from. I use my eye up there, me."

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CHAPTER XVI.

Cosme Takes to Studying the Landscape.

THE young Mexican, taking his employer's advice seriously, applied himself from that time on to his double task of attending the farm work and studying the landscape at the same time.

He was thus engaged on the very same day that his father returned home from his latest trip with the round-up forces.

Close to the upper edge of the field where Cosme was harrowing, a thicket of scrub oak grew like a low green wall. Through a slight break in this green wall Cosme could catch fleeting glimpses of the northern extremity of the Tefoya Mesa. For the most part, where the mesa joined the plains, it was as if the waves of a low, advancing ocean had suddenly been struck rigid and motionless. Cosme noticed at length that at one point the rigid wave had been transformed into a low, sheer wall. Stopping at each returning round to swing his team into the furrow, Cosme took occasion to study this northern slope, in which direction lay the short cut to the 7-H Ranch.

The memory of his bad day's work at Pinos Altos, three weeks before, weighed heavily upon him. He had gambled away the money that his employer had entrusted to him, and, fearful that he or Rupert might come into town and find out what had been done, if he had the account charged to Mr. Carrol, he had compromised matters with himself by having the bill charged to his own father. Valdez, senior, was known to be good pay, and the grocer made no objection. But suppose that his father should chance to return and should visit that grocery before he (Cosme) could save up enough out of his wages of ten dollars a month, to settle it himself? The lad turned cold at the thought.

If he could but find the missing horse and claim the promised reward!

Cosme had swung his team around into the furrow for the twentieth time, and was slowly settling down to the next long plod around the field, when, suddenly, a tiny speck of white lying at the very foot of the abrupt break in the mesa wall, attracted his attention. It seemed to him odd that he had never noticed it before, for it was a conspicuous point in the universal waste of gray. Cosme went on with his work at last, but at each succeeding turn he looked and looked again to make sure that the speck was yet there. Finally, as his eyes again sought the white spot, he saw a pair of vultures slowly circling and circling above it. When he saw the vultures, Cosme grinned with pure enjoyment. He thought of the many snubbings that he had had

from Rupert, and, above all, of the complete and workmanlike threshing that he had received at Rupert's hands, not so long ago, and his black eyes glittered.

"Aha! this afternoon, now, I make some observation, me, on 'at place 'at look like one snowdrif', w'en there is not any snow somew'ere else!"

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Down at the ranch house Nora was having trouble with her little flock of poultry. After a fruitless search about the corrals and barn, she went into the house to tell her grandmother that the big hen turkey was missing.

"Them turkeys are enough sight more bother than they're worth!" Mrs. Easton declared, on hearing this. "They're jest like them sand fleas: one minute the ground 'll be covered with 'em, and you think all you've got to do is to put out your foot and squawsh 'em, but, when your foot gets there, they're gone!"

"Maybe she's sitting," Nora suggested.

"I wouldn't wonder a mite; and if she is, she's as like to 'a' gone down to Pinos Altos or the Cimarron to do it as to 'a' stayed within ten miles of home."

"Are you talking of that hen turkey?" asked Mr. Carrol, from his seat near the window. "I saw her skulking around in that oak thicket, up at the end of the west field, the last time I was up there. I thought then that she was probably stealing a nest."

"You can depend on it that's where you'll find her," said Mrs. Easton.

"I'll go right up and see," Nora replied, taking up the broad-brimmed straw hat that she had but just tossed down, and starting off in the direction of the field. She was a good deal surprised, on nearing the field, to find one of the work horses tied under a tree, close to the oak thicket, the harrow standing idly in the furrow, and Cosme, with the other horse, nowhere in sight. The trampled grass under the tree showed that the horse had been there, stamping, and fighting flies, a long time. It seemed to her that there was something wrong about such a state of affairs, but recalling that her father had the utmost faith in Cosme, she decided that he might possibly have been called away somewhere upon legitimate business. She went on, and, a moment after, was lost to view in the dense growth of scrub oaks. The thicket was so dense, in fact, that she presently found herself obliged to crawl on hands and knees before she could penetrate its depths. Her perseverance was rewarded when, a few yards away, she caught a glimpse of the alert head and watchful eyes of the turkey as she crouched silently on her nest. Seeing that the troublesome bird was likely to be as safe there as anywhere else, and would certainly resent interference, Nora had just decided to leave her alone, and to creep out as she had come, when she heard the sound of footsteps close at hand.

Rupert had returned from the range early in the afternoon. Dreading any accidental chance that might leave him alone with his father, and so give the latter opportunity to ask inconvenient questions, he thought that he would go up and see how Cosme was coming on with the harrowing.

Like Nora, he stopped in astonishment at sight of the tethered horse standing alone, but, unlike her, he was not ready to believe that any lawful errand of Cosme's could account for the situation; standing close to the thicket, with his hand on the horse's mane, he glanced inquiringly around just at the instant that Cosme's head suddenly appeared ascending from a little arroyo that led out on to the plains, out of sight from the house. The head was followed by the Mexican's slim little body, and the body was mounted on the missing work horse. Presently horse and rider had scrambled out of the gully and were slowly approaching the spot where Rupert awaited in angry impatience.

"This is a nice piece of business!" began Rupert, pointing to the reeking horse,

which gave every indication of having been mercilessly ridden. "Look at that horse! Wet with foam and sweat, and he a plow horse! Father shall hear of this, now I promise you. You'll have better luck than you deserve if you don't get fired for this!"

Cosme, unabashed, slid from the horse's back and quietly began replacing the harness. Not until Rupert, angered still more by his silence, had started to go away, did he speak. "Wait," he said, deliberately. "Me, I got some speak to tell to yo'."

The Mexican's countenance, as he faced Rupert, wore a bluish pallor, strikingly apparent, underlaid as it was by his tawny coloring. But it was not fear of Rupert, or of anything that Rupert might say, that caused his face to blanch and his knees to wobble. Returning, elated and triumphant from his clandestine investigation of the mesa cliff, feeling jubilantly certain of a safe and speedy settlement of the account that so troubled him, Cosme had met his Nemesis. His Nemesis took the outward semblance of his father, Juan Valdez, and Juan Valdez had been able to convince his son, in words that scorched like molten lava, that the way of the transgressor is hard. Valdez had been out in search of his son, and the latter had nearly reached the field where he was supposed, by his trusting employer, to be working, when he came face to face with his parent.

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CHAPTER XVII.

What Cosme Found.

THE interview between father and son was not unduly prolonged. Valdez, senior, had, it is true, the power to keep silence in two languages—and that was a thing to be proud of, since so many people of so many races find it impossible to keep their thoughts to themselves in one—but he did not exercise his gift on Cosme. When the latter, with his father's stern permission, started on again, it was at a much slower pace and with no elation in his heart. But, as his horse climbed wearily up out of the arroyo on to the level ground, the sight of Rupert standing motionless beside the work horse that he, Cosme, had left behind, gave the resourceful young Mexican an idea. It was plain that Rupert was waiting to upbraid him; very well—he would settle that matter by springing on him a new and worse scheme for getting himself out of a new and worse difficulty.

When the harness was properly adjusted, and Rupert had hesitated expectantly in answer to his call, Cosme suddenly turned his back on the horses and confronted Rupert. He extended his open hand; on the palm something white was glistening.

"What is 'at?" he demanded.

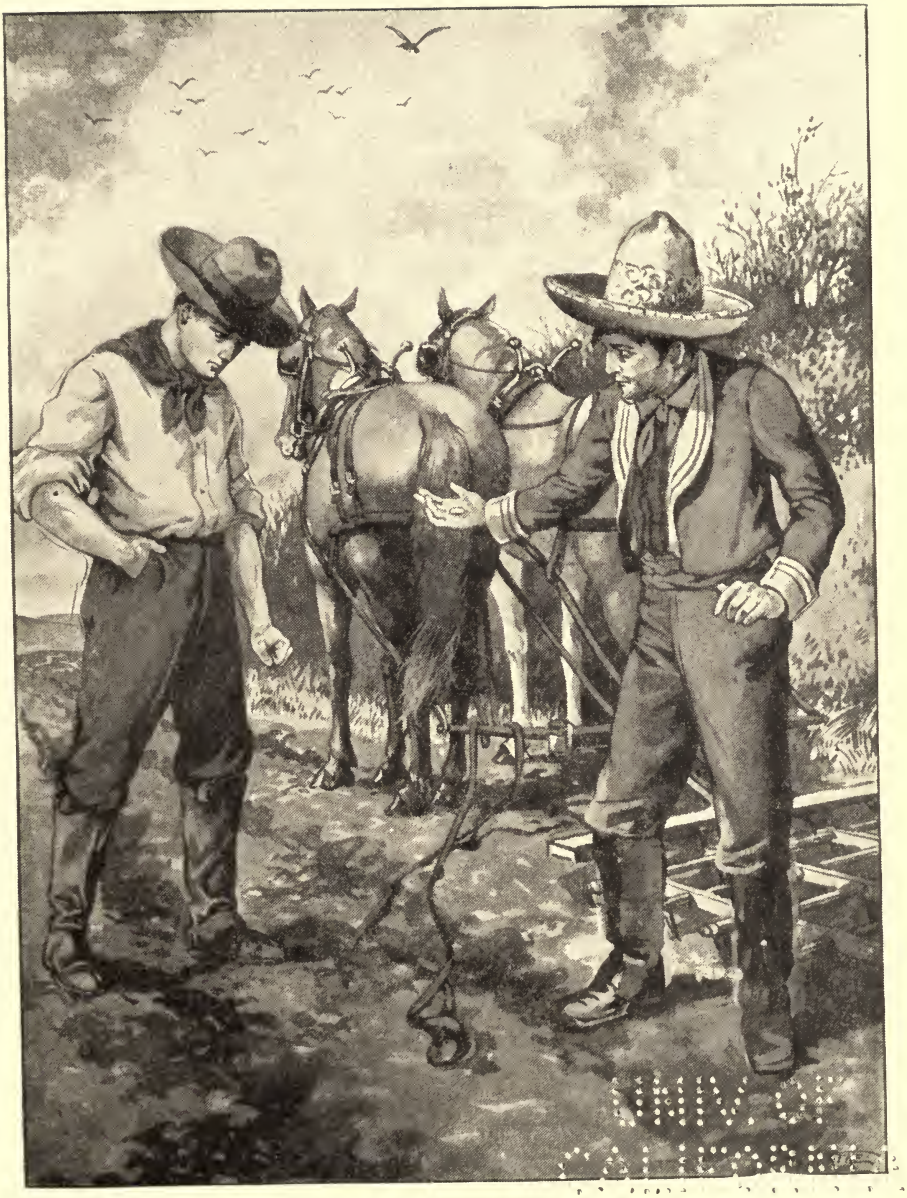
Rupert picked up the glittering trifle and examined it.

"You know perfectly well what it is, and that it's mine. How did it get into your hands? Don't tell me any lies about it, for I'm willing to thresh you again, and to do a good job, too, if I think you need it."

The glittering object was a silver coin with a pin soldered on to one side. The date of its coinage was that of the year of Rupert's birth; above the date his initials were engraved. Nora had a coin of the same value with the year of her birth engraved, and, moreover, the Mexican silversmith who did the engraving was an uncle of Cosme's, and had stopped at the ranch house, with his little traveling forge, while doing the work.

"You know it's mine," Rupert repeated. "I didn't even know I'd lost it—thought it was on my Sunday coat. Where did you find it?"

Cosme's black eyes were on Rupert's face as he answered: "I fin' it—'at pin—lyin' in some dirt, one, two steps from a dead horse." Rupert gasped. The objects around him seemed to undulate and waver for a moment; he recovered himself quickly to hear Cosme's voice saying: "'At horse—



"What is 'at?" Cosme demanded.

w'ite, she was—never goin' run fas'er than the win' no more. All the time I was think': 'Poor alba Snowflake, w'at a bad man rode off the cliff and break at the neck!' Then I see that pin lookin' up at me like one eye that tell the truth, 'n' I know. I know how Snowflake was come there. I been use' that short cut to the 7-H myself, sometime."

The Mexican, his recital concluded, waited gravely. For a minute Rupert could not speak. A swift, wild wing, cleaving the upper air, cast its shadow over him; involuntarily he raised his eyes to watch the bird's flight, wishing that he, too, had the power to take wing and fly away from this network of deceit and trouble that he had woven about himself. Cosme's eyes followed his with a dim comprehension of his thought, but he waited; it was for Rupert to speak.

"Well," said Rupert, at length, "what are you going to do about it? Go to my father and tell what you have found, of course. Here, you can take this pin to show him, if he has any doubts of your story. But he won't have," he added, bitterly; "he'll recognize it by its ear marks."

"Yo' padre," observed the unmoved Cosme, "he offa' cincuenta dolla' for 'at horse—cincuenta dolla'! More 'n she's wor'se—dead horse so; but he no say she mus' be alive. He say cincuenta dolla', jest so. See?"

"Go and tell him, then, you Mexican dog!" Rupert burst out furiously, "and get your money." He started to go away, instantly resolved that, despite his promise to Nora, he would leave home, never to return, and would leave it on the instant.

But Cosme's voice again arrested him. "Hole on, Rupert! I got some more words to say. One word is, 'at Mexican dog jes' good's 'Merican coward—that w'at I think, me. I was feel sorrowful w'en I fin' 'at Snowflake. I feel sorrowful for you; I no feel sorrowful now, but I no goin' to tell yo' padre—not yet. I want to talk at you," he continued, miserably. "I have some troubles also, too."

"Well?" urged Rupert, impatiently, as Cosme paused.

"Si; mi padre he got some notion not like w'ite notion. He believe in w'ip. He think I do some wrong, me. I was goin' make it all right. I no kill mos' fines' horse in de worl', 'n' go on actin' some lie to make all peoples believe 'at 'at horse been stole. No; but mi padre"—Cosme's teeth were chattering as the vision of his padre in his savage wrath, for Valdez' anger had lost none of its intensity by waiting, rose vividly to his remembrance; if Rupert was a moral coward he was undeniably a physical one, and the luster of his black eyes was dimmed by smarting tears that he dashed roughly aside as he concluded: "Me padre goin' w'ip me with cactus branch. Same like los Penitentes. To-night he say for me to come at the ole cabin w'ere we was use' to live; down yon'"—he waved his hand toward the former abode of the Valdez family, a squalid hut, nestling against the barren hillside, a mile away; "come at the edge of night, mi padre say. He will be at there. Say he goin' break me of some bad habit. I say at him I was too ole to w'ip. Not this time, he say; say he goin' do me good with some scar."

"He's an old scoundrel!" observed Rupert, candidly. "What did you do?"

"Not anything 'at was no matter; I was goin' make it all right."

Rupert did not insist upon a more explicit answer. The result of his own disobedience had been so tragic that it seemed improbable that the Mexican could have done anything worth mentioning beside it. Yet Cosme's offense had been, in intention, much worse than his. Both had weakly yielded to temptation, and Rupert's remorse was none the less bitter because the temptation that had conquered him was not base, as Cosme's had been.

"I don't see how I can help it if he has taken a notion to thresh you," Rupert said

at last, his interest in Cosme's affliction eclipsed by the recollection of his own greater troubles.

Cosme lifted his ragged straw hat and passed his hand over his forehead, on which the perspiration stood in heavy drops. "I goin' git out of it," he said.

"How?"

"I goin' git someone to go at 'at cabin in my place."

"You're acquainted with some bigger fool than I am, then, if you know of anyone you can get."

"No, no fool; muchos troubles. I not goin' ask yo' padre for 'at rewar'—not goin' say 'at snowdrif' was a Snowflake. No. You was a-goin' at 'at cabin in my place."

"I go in your place!" cried Rupert. "I think I see myself! Are you crazy?"

"No; no crezee. See, it easy. We both same shape, both so high. Yo' has on my clo'es—all dark in cabin. Mi padre still man, no speak—jes' w'ip, w'ip! All he say, 'Tek off yo' coat!" Then he bring the cactus branch down on yo' shoulda'—swish, swish!" Cosme enacted the imaginary interview with a spirit and accuracy born of experience. "W'en mi padre t'ink yo' had 'nuff," he continued, "he jes' go off an' leave yo' 'lone. I know. Then I goin' help yo' home. I goin' be mighty good at yo', then," he added, commiseratingly.

"Well, you have hatched up a beautiful scheme," said Rupert, who had been studying the situation while Cosme talked. "I suppose you know that he'll kill me if he finds me out, even if he don't do it thinking that he's finishing you off."

"He goin' stop short off of killin'," returned Cosme, doggedly. "He no fin' yo' out; yo' keep still, 'at all; blood no tell. W'ite blood make same kin' of stain like Mexican—both red. Yo' goin' do it?"

He looked into Rupert's face; the eyes of both boys glared at each other for a moment, then Rupert's gaze dropped. "Yes," he said, "I'm going to do it." He was answering his own thoughts rather than Cosme's words, but he knew very well that the latter understood him to promise to become his substitute for a flogging.

He walked away, reflecting that by the time Cosme discovered that he had been deceived, and told his father what he knew, he himself would be so far away that it could not much matter what his father said or did. His heart was filled with bitter self-contempt, but he could not bring himself to tell the truth, as he longed to do; still less could he endure that his father should hear it from Cosme.

"It'll all come out some time; I wonder that no one has found poor Snowflake before now," he thought, miserably. "I'm not afraid that Cosme—confound him!—will tell, as long as he thinks I've saved him a whipping. He'll be so afraid of my going back on him and telling old Valdez the truth that he'll never open his mouth about it, but I can't stay and bear it a minute longer. I wish, for poor Nora's sake, that I had honor enough about me to face the truth. She'd do it if she was in my place. And what is there to face? Just father's anger. But—how angry he can be! No, I'll go away. I promised Nora that I wouldn't, but I will. I've already proved myself a coward; now I'll add liar to that, and maybe she won't think it worth while to fret after me when I'm gone."

So communing with himself, ashamed, repentant, remorseful, yet still lacking the courage to take the course that he knew to be right, he approached the house, intent on slipping quietly by it into the highroad. There was a strange horse tethered to the hitching-post in front of the house, and, reflecting that the visitor, whoever he might be, would soon be going, and might overtake him if he were on the road, Rupert stepped aside and sat down in the lee of a strawstack to await his departure. As he sat with his elbows propped on his

knees and his eyes fixed on the highway that he meant soon to traverse, there seemed to him a desolate suggestiveness in the way in which the road went on and on, growing darker as the familiar surroundings receded, until, at last, all was lost to view in a heavy pall of darkness, and one could but guess at what lay beyond. So had he gone on in wrongdoing until now. What lay beyond that verge to which the lights, the love of home, could not penetrate?

The visitor, a neighbor, who had called simply to ask about the injured foot and to inquire if there was any news of the stolen horse, came out, mounted his horse, and rode away. Still Rupert, lost in gloomy reverie, did not stir.

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When Rupert and Cosme, standing so close to the oak scrub that, lying hidden in its depths, she could not avoid hearing every word of their conversation, began talking, Nora started to wriggle out of her place of concealment. After hearing a sentence or two, however, she lay perfectly quiet, listening.

When the angry interview was over, she still crouched silently in her place until Rupert was out of sight. A hasty glance in his direction assured her that Cosme was once more plodding along beside his harrow, to all appearances a perfectly guileless Mexican; then Nora crept out—followed by the derisive chatter of the hen turkey, who felt herself mistress of the situation—dropped quietly into the gully up which Cosme had so recently ridden, and so made her way home, unobserved by either of the boys.

Nora did not go into the house; instead she began an anxious, breathless search about the premises, interrupted only by an occasional pause to scan the highway, down which she feared to see a boyish figure striding. Knowing Rupert as she did, she knew, to an unerring certainty, that he would either immediately confess the part that he had taken in the mare's disappearance, or else, in spite of his promise to the contrary, he would leave home, bent on never returning. Never might have seemed a long date to set for the offense that he had committed, but Rupert's sister knew something of the matchless reserves of obstinacy in her dreamy brother's character. Having assured herself that he had not entered the house, she continued the search, oppressed with a terrible feeling that perhaps his whole future depended upon her now doing the right thing in the right way. Not repulsing him, no, no! when he so needed support; not upbraiding him; not upholding him in his wrongdoing, and so helping to blunt his moral susceptibility; not condoning his cowardice—for he had been cowardly—but making him feel, through and above all, that she loved him, that she was not acting as his judge, that she would die for him and make no sign, if need be. Poor Nora hurried back and forth, with all these thoughts, not formulated, but in a confused, tormenting jumble, spurring her on. More than that, even before the hen turkey's derisive chatter had followed her quiet retreat from the oak thicket she had thought of a plan for keeping Cosme from claiming the fifty-dollar reward, and, at the same time, shielding Rupert himself until, of his own accord, he should be ready to speak the truth.

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CHAPTER XVIII.

Nora Carries Out Her Plan.

CONTINUING her search for Rupert, Nora at length went out to the straw-stacks that, like so many golden wigwams, crowded close up against the corral walls. Crouched under one of these, his face hidden in his hands, she found her brother.

Going quietly to his side, she softly laid her hand on his shoulder. She could scarcely restrain the cry of dismay that

rose to her lips as she saw the haggard wretchedness of the face that was raised to meet her own. If she had ever for a moment wavered, as she had not, in her determination to do all in her power to help her brother at this crisis in his life, the expression on his face then would have rebuked her.

Was not she, also, her brother's keeper? That did not mean, according to her understanding of it, that she was to try to preach to him. What boy in his senses would not have resented that? And she younger than himself, too.

No, the real meaning of the words was that she was to walk beside him, to walk silently and without complaint, into the valley of humiliation. She returned, steadily, Rupert's inquiring gaze.

"Rupert," she said, quietly, "I didn't ask you any questions when—when something happened, not long ago. But—you made me a promise. Sometimes—things have come up that make me almost afraid that you don't—don't intend to keep it."

"You know already that I am a coward, and now you are beginning to understand that I am also a liar," returned Rupert, with resolute hardihood. "You are quite right, if you refer to my promise to you not to leave here. I intend to break that promise. What put it so aptly into your head that I do? You see you're getting down to the bottom of my admirable character—or, I should say, the dregs."

Nora, dreading to let him know that she had overheard the interview between himself and Cosme, parried a little.

"It isn't very comfortable at home, just now," she said. Yet she knew that she must tell him what she had heard, if he could not be induced otherwise to renew his promise.

"It's a good time to leave it, then, if it isn't comfortable, especially as I happen to be the one who makes it uncomfortable," Rupert said, again hiding his face in his hands.

Nora stood beside him for a silent moment, wondering anxiously what course she had better take, then she said softly, "But you won't go away, will you, Rupert?"

"Yes," returned Rupert, looking up suddenly, "yes, I will. You may say that I've broken my promise to you. That's all right—I've done a number of things; one more or less don't matter. You'll forget about it—and me—when I'm gone."

Nora quivered, but made no direct reply to this speech. After a momentary struggle she said, "I didn't mean it, Rupert—it was an accident—but I was up in the oak patch, and—I heard what Cosme said to you this afternoon."

Rupert sprang to his feet with an exclamation of surprise and anger, but he presently resumed his seat. "After all, it don't matter," he said, doggedly. "You knew I had taken the horse, and suspected, of course, that I had killed her. I did. That's all there is to it."

"Unless," Nora suggested, "you should conclude to tell father."

"Which I shall not. Set your mind at rest on that score."

"Surely, you will not let Cosme's father—"

"No," returned Rupert, with a glance down the darkening road, "no, I will not do that."

"Then will you promise me one thing, Rupert—just one thing? Will you?"

"How can I tell until I know what it is? And what are my promises good for, anyway?" answered the boy, miserably.

"Rupert, I never knew you to tell a lie, or to break a promise."

"Until this business came up; put that in and you'll have it right. I seem to myself to have been the father of lies, lately. I seem to be somebody else, all at once; maybe it's a kind of hypnotism," he continued, desperately. "I don't lose myself in day dreams any more, for one thing, and I haven't touched my violin since. There

isn't any music in me now. I'm more like one of those devil fish that we read of. I'm full of a blackness that oozes out and obscures all the good in me—if there ever was any."

"It's all good, and the blackness will pass. Only promise me that you will not leave home to-night, Rupert."

Rupert looked at her speculatively. "Why should I promise that, Nora? I might just as well walk into a den of raging lions and be done with it. If you heard what Cosme said, you know very well that he'll tell the whole story to father and come on him for the fifty dollars. Besides, if I go away it'll cost father fifty dollars, in addition to the three hundred that I've already lost him. I understand all that, and I'm going. There's some consolation in knowing that Cosme will get the whipping he deserves."

"But, wait—wait, Rupert! I have a plan. If Cosme does not tell—if everything goes on as usual—will you stay, then, Rupert?"

"I don't see how Cosme's mouth is to be shut, unless I go to the cabin in his place," objected Rupert, a faint color tinging his cheek. It seemed to him that shame upon shame was piling upon him. Was there no spark of manhood in him, that he could stoop to let honest little Nora concoct schemes for saving him from the punishment that he deserved, he felt, more than Cosme did—Cosme who was a Mexican. "I'll promise for to-night," he said, abruptly. "I will not go to the cabin, and I don't think wild horses could drag me before father, but—I will not go away yet."

"Father need not know until you are ready to tell him," Nora repeated again. "You'll tell him yourself, some day. Do not worry about Cosme. I have a plan."

She gave no inkling as to what the plan was, and Rupert, his senses dulled by misery, had not the curiosity to ask.

. . . . . .

Juan Valdez had not been obliged to nurse his wrath against his son to keep it warm. It was still burning hot as he approached the deserted cabin on the hillside, where, as he supposed, Cosme awaited him. It was almost dark without the cabin, and so dark within that, as Valdez reached the door and shoved it open, he could, at first, distinguish nothing inside. He stood upon the threshold for a full minute, a sinister-looking figure, peering into the gloom. He was clad in the rough dress of the frontiersman, and he carried in his right hand a long, lithe branch of green cane cactus, armed with its innumerable sharp needle-points, each from a quarter to a half inch in length. His eyes becoming accustomed to the darkness, he at length descried another pair of eyes shining back at him through the gloom, and the savage fury that had begun to well up in him at the thought that his son had failed him, abated a trifle, but it was with no less sternness that he gave his order:

"Come out here an' tek off yo' coat, Cosme; yo' goin' need it for pillow w'en I gits t'rough with yo' this time!"

"Mr. Valdez—if you please, wait. I—I—want to talk with you," responded a trembling voice.

Valdez nearly fell over backward as, out from the shadowy corner into the dim light that came in at the open doorway, stepped, not Cosme, but Eleanor Carrol!

Valdez knew Nora very well, and, on general principles, approved of her, but her presence at this juncture, apparently in Cosme's stead, seemed to him little less than an outrage. He ground his teeth in rage, and the cactus branch in his hand quivered as Nora, her voice strained and harsh with the sick terror that shook her from head to foot, but none the less resolute to accomplish her purpose, repeated: "I want to talk to you, Mr. Valdez."

"Maybe dis was w'at yo' calls one of dem new kin' o' 'Merican jokes, hey?" demanded Valdez, fiercely, but prudently dropping the cactus branch, lest he should be tempted to use it.

"Oh, no, no! How could I try to make a joke of such a thing as this?" cried Nora, eagerly. "But," she went on, venturing a step nearer the angry father and laying a timid hand appealingly on his arm, "I want you, if you please, to let Cosme go—not to punish him this time."

Valdez' gray mustache began to bristle, a sure indication of rising temper; his anger, however, was not directed against Nora. "He make a complain' at yo', dat Cosme; he tell yo' come at me an' try for make me no w'ip?" he asked, stooping to regain the cactus branch.

"No, no, indeed, he did not, Mr. Valdez. No one asked me to come; no one knows that I am here. I came of my own accord."

"Yo' was a brave señorita," Valdez admitted, with a kind of reluctant admiration, and immediately added: "How yo' know Cosme goin' git w'ipped?"

"I—I—came to hear of it in a way—a strange way, Mr. Valdez, but it was not Cosme's fault that I heard. He does not even know that I know of it, and—if you will please believe me, and not ask me how I heard—"

"Oh, me, I was believe all w'at yo' says. Yo' is one dem kin' w'at spick straight," Valdez acknowledged. "I no ask 'bout dat some more, but yo' tell me w'at for yo' no want Cosme w'ipped?"

In her anxiety to shield Rupert, Nora had completely overlooked the fact that Valdez, senior, would certainly be surprised, not to say astonished, at the interest that she was suddenly displaying in his son, yet she felt his question to be so reasonable that she must give an answer.

"I—it seems to me such a cruel way of whipping, and he is such a big boy," she stammered.

"W'ippin' goin' hurt small boy, same's big," Valdez assured her, "an' Cosme he have to have a w'ippin' dat was cruel to make him rememb' some t'ings."

"I don't think it's right," Nora persisted, sticking to the only reason that she felt free to offer. "There ought to be other ways."

"No odder ways good for Cosme," declared Cosme's father, shaking his head, gloomily. "W'ip he mus' be."

He was now sure that he understood the real cause of Nora's solicitude in Cosme's behalf. As far as his experience went, all of the white people—Protestants and Catholics alike—were strongly opposed to the rites and the merciless flagellations practiced by the Order of Penitentes, to which he belonged, and into which he fully intended to induct Cosme. He believed that the tender-hearted white girl was begging off for Cosme, not only on the ground of humanity, but from religious convictions also. He was so sure of this that he at once accepted it as an idea to be combated. "Cosme he ain' like w'ite folks," he said, persuasively. "W'ite folks dey have dey kin' o' 'ligion w'at dey gits t'rough de head; Cosme he gits his t'rough de hide, si."

"Please don't whip him!" Nora implored, unable, in her distress, to follow this line of reasoning.

"Si, I got Cosme's soul on my han' to be saved. I goin' lick him good. W'at for he no come to-night, w'en I tell him?" he added, suspiciously.

"He was led to believe that you would not need him," returned Nora, evasively. And she went on quickly, with seeming irrelevance, "You remember my Jersey heifer, Mr. Valdez?"

"Si; w'at for I forgit her? She only Jersey on range."

"Yes, and she's mine, Mr. Valdez—all mine."

"Si, dat I know, me. I works for dat outfit w'at lef' her with yo'. I could 'a' save' her, too, all same like yo'," he added, enviously. He had always begrudged Carrol's daughter the possession of the only Jersey on the range.

"Very well; then you know that I can do

what I like with her, and if—if—you will please let Cosme off, I will give her to you, Mr. Valdez."

"S'posin' me, I say si, I do it. W'at, den, become of Cosme's soul?" inquired Valdez, visibly wavering, however, in his determination to insure Cosme's salvation.

"Perhaps Cosme will be a better boy after this; perhaps he will—" began Nora, hopefully.

But Valdez interrupted her. If he accepted the bribe, it seemed, even to his flexible conscience, that it was no more than fair to warn the girl of the futility of any gentle means with Cosme. "Dat's a nice heifer, dat Jersey. I goin' let Cosme off dis time, if yo' say so," he began, "but yo' can't 'pend on nuttin' w'at 'at Cosme say at yo'. Some Mexican dey learn w'ite folks 'ligion an' keep it up good. Dey got better min's dan w'at Cosme has. Cosme he young, an' besides dat, he fool, too—can't 'pend on boy like him. W'ere yo' say dat heifer was at?"

Nora told him, and, soon after, they parted on much better terms than had seemed at all probable at the beginning of the interview. Shielded by the thickening dusk, they were just in time to escape the observation of Cosme, who was making a stealthy approach to the cabin from the rear.

The boy was intent on carrying out his benevolent purpose of being "very good at" Rupert, when his father should have finished with him. Reaching the cabin, he stole noiselessly up to one of the windows, underneath which he crouched, listening anxiously. Assured at last that his father was not within, he mustered courage to go to the door, which he cautiously shoved open; still no sound. He stood on the threshold, as his father had done, peering into the darkness, for, by this time, it was entirely dark within the cabin, until the silence began to frighten him. "Rup't!" he whispered softly. "Rup't, w'ere yo' at?"

A shuddering terror, lest his father had not this time stopped "short off of killin'," held him motionless for an instant. Then he told himself doggedly: "Me, I got to know." He advanced into the room with cautious tread, feeling at each alternate step with his foot before he ventured to set it down, lest it should be placed upon a recumbent body, until, in the center of the room, he stopped, drew a match from his pocket, and lit it. The tiny flame, held aloft, revealed a room empty of human occupants, but in the interval before it went out, it revealed something else that, to the trained eye of the Mexican boy, told much. On the floor beside him he had seen a cactus branch. Striking another match, he applied it to one of the splintered bits of dry pine still remaining in the fireplace, and, with this torch in hand, again examined the cactus branch, which he approached with respectful caution, as if apprehensive that it might, through some demoniac agency, spring up and attack him of its own accord. Nothing of the sort occurring, he ventured to turn it over with the toe of his boot. "Not been use' hard—not 'tall," was his sage conclusion. "Mi padre he goin' be 'shamed to w'ip hard, w'en he see how good I was come at the cabin." It was an unconscious tribute to his father's silent ways that he had absolutely no fear that Valdez had discovered the identity of his victim. His father would ask no questions, and Rupert, Cosme knew in the depths of his treacherous soul, had enough heroism, when put to the test, to withstand any torture and make no outcry. He put out the torch, and, closing the door again, made his way back to the Carrol ranch, well pleased with the outcome of his scheme, although, certainly, it was hard to be obliged to give up the "rewar'."

CHAPTER XIX.

"THE LAND OF DREADFUL DREAMS."

THE Carrol family were wont to pass their evenings together after the early supper was over, and Cosme, who always sought his bed in the kitchen attic at an early hour, sometimes sat among them, modestly in the background and listening respectfully to whatever chanced to be said. It was in this way that the attentive Mexican had stored his mind with the wise sayings of "Señora Easton."

Rupert, after he had again promised his sister that he would not leave until she had had an opportunity to try her plan—whatever it was—passed an indescribably wretched evening. He felt that Nora's plan, like everything else, was bound to be a failure, and in his heart there sprang up a feeling of resentment against his sister for having again induced him to remain. It would have been so much better, he told himself, to leave—to leave as fast and far as time and opportunity would take him. Cosme, sitting blinking beside the kitchen stove, was only waiting, of course, for a chance to tell his father of the discovery that he had made that afternoon. Rupert wished that he had the courage to forestall the disclosure and the explosion that was bound to follow by telling of it himself, but he could not at the moment bring himself to do it.

Still the minutes slipped away. Bedtime came, and Cosme yet crouched in his accustomed corner, his black eyes glinting on all with amiable impartiality, although an interested observer might have noticed that they shifted quickly from every other face or object, to rest inquiringly on Rupert. As for Nora, she went quietly about her usual household tasks, divided between jubilant elation—for Rupert was still at home—and a growing feeling of apprehension. She had not at all worked out the details of her hasty transaction; at the moment she had thought only of keeping Rupert at home. Recalling now her interview with Valdez, and the price that she had paid to save Cosme a whipping, she began to wonder, for the first time, how she was to account for the fact that the little Jersey had passed from her ownership to that of Valdez. "I will keep still if they ask me," she decided. "I will not tell an untruth—no, not to save my life, or Rupert's, and that's worth more than mine—but I can keep still, and I'll ask Mr. Valdez not to tell."

Full of this purpose, she slipped out of the house the next morning almost before it was light enough to see clearly, and started to walk to the Mexican's cabin, a couple of miles away. But Valdez was also astir early. He had long coveted the Jersey heifer, and, now that she was his, meant to lose no time in getting her in with his own small herd. He reflected complacently that the heifer would amply repay any financial loss that he had incurred on account of Cosme's gambling propensities. In consequence of his haste to gain possession of the four-footed treasure that was to accomplish so much, Nora had not made half the distance to the Valdez residence when she encountered the owner thereof, mounted on a gaunt cow-pony, and making good time in the direction of the Carrol cattle ranch. Valdez halted abruptly as Nora's slender little figure and anxious upturned face appeared in the roadway before him. He instantly jumped to the conclusion that she had come to tell him that he could not have the heifer, and as quickly decided that he would be justified in telling her, as a means of coercion, that he would kill Cosme if she repudiated her bargain. When, however, Nora made known her errand, he readily acceded to her views, only stipulating that he might be allowed to refer all inquirers to her for an explanation.

"Yes, you'll have to do that—you surely will," Nora agreed.

She looked so unhappy that Valdez, soft-

ened, sought to cheer her by feigning to see some virtue in the lad for whose sake, as he supposed, she was sacrificing so much. "Maybe dat Cosme goin' be more civilize' after he git 'Merican 'ligion," he said. "Maybe he be good boy; I do'no, me—maybe it was like 'Mericans say: he not so w'ite like he is painted."

"Maybe not," returned Nora. "I hope you'll get the heifer all right, Mr. Valdez."

"Oh, yes, I gits her. I have no troub' at all. Adios!"

Nora sped back home, and Valdez rode on. Before noon the pretty Jersey was safe in his corral. But the Jersey was, in her lesser way, almost as notable an animal as the white mare, therefore when Rupert rode out to the range that morning and cast an inquiring eye over the herd, her absence was instantly discovered. She had never been known to stray away from her mates, and since none of the other cattle were missing, her disappearance seemed unaccountable. After a pretty diligent search, bent on doing his duty in this case, at least, Rupert rode back to the house and reported the loss to his father.

"Well, well! What will go next? Are you sure you have hunted for her thoroughly?"

"Yes, and I don't see how anyone could have stolen her, father."

"You didn't see how anyone could have stolen Snowflake, did you? But she was stolen."

Rupert was silent. After a moment's reflection, Mr. Carrol said: "You'd better ride over and tell Valdez; he's at home now. He'll get on her track sooner than anyone else, because he's all over the country, and—"

"Wait a minute, father," interposed a trembling voice. "I—please don't send Rupert down to ask Mr. Valdez about Daisy—because—please don't!" she concluded, lamely.

Mr. Carrol turned around and stared at her in sheer amazement, then: "Why not?" he demanded. "I never heard of such a silly thing in my life! Don't you want to find Daisy again?"

"No—yes—I—father, she isn't lost, she isn't stolen. I—I know where she is. I sold her."

"You sold her!" echoed her father. He stared at the girl a moment, and then sat down heavily. It was not like Eleanor to keep things from him. "When did you sell her?" he asked.

Nora shook her head miserably. "I—I would rather not tell, father."

"What did you get for her?"

Again Nora shook her head.

"Do you mean that you won't tell?"

"I *can't* tell you, father. I wish I could, but—I can't."

"Why?"

Nora burst into tears. "If I could tell you that, father, I could tell it all to you."

She was sitting beside the table, and, as she spoke, she leaned her forehead upon it, until her loose brown hair, falling on either side her face, hid its convulsed workings. Mr. Carrol looked at her—his little daughter, whom he had always found, before this, so obedient, so frank—and the pain that, but a moment since, had pierced his heart like the thrust of a keen-bladed knife, gave place to another feeling—something cruel and savage that seemed to take possession of him as he looked at the bent head and shaking shoulders of the girl, who for the first time in her life distinctly refused to do his bidding, to answer the questions that he had a perfect right to ask.

"You may keep your secret," he said, coldly. "A father is of mighty little account in this house, it seems; but, until you are ready to explain the whole thing to me, you may stay in the root cellar, and"—with a glance at Mrs. Easton, who stared in open-mouthed dismay, as she heard this sentence—"I'll keep the key."

"How long is it since I said that I didn't envy St. Peter his job?" murmured the old lady, solemnly. "Yet, for all the responsi-

bility, I'd rather have it than that of the creatur' who keeps the keys to the other place!"

"I'll keep the key," repeated Mr. Carrol, doggedly. He rose from his seat, and, with very little aid from his crutch—for the injured foot was now nearly well—started for the door. "Come, Eleanor," he said, sternly.

"Wait, wait, James!" Mrs. Easton begged. "You know—why, James, it's as dark as a stack of black cats in that cellar, and, like enough, there's tarantlers, to say nothing of the centipedes that are always there. And James, Nora's afraid of the dark, you know that yourself—James!" But as Mr. Carrol was by this time outside the door, she hurried after him, to add: "Maybe—oh, James! I hate to say it right before the poor child! You know it ain't like Nora to act this way, to be obstinate. She leaves that to them that can make a plumb success of it. She ain't been sleepin' well lately. She's been havin' bad dreams, and she's afraid of the dark—she always was. Why, James! James!" her voice rising to an imploring cry as Mr. Carrol continued on his course toward the root cellar with Nora following meekly at his heels. Finding that her son-in-law would not stop, Mrs. Easton ran after him with a nimbleness surprising in one of her age. "Wait!" she beseeched again, and Mr. Carrol stopped.

"What do you want?" he demanded, sternly.

"I want to tell you, first, that there was a rattlesnake in that cellar not long ago, and it's working alive with insects—you know that. That was the main reason why you said yourself that we'd better not put things there any more."

"Is that all you've got to say?"

"No, it ain't. I hate to say it before Nora, but you compel me to. The child ain't been sleepin' well lately; it ain't like her to do anything underhanded or sneakin', and, maybe—who can tell?—she's been havin' bad dreams. Maybe her brain is softenin'!"

As if he almost hoped that her strange conduct might be accounted for in this way, Mr. Carrol looked searchingly at Nora. The girl, knowing the wiles of her doting grandmother, returned the look, a faint smile lighting up her tear-stained face.

"Her brain ain't soft, nor her heart, either," Mr. Carrol announced, as the result of his inspection. He took another step, and halted; in spite of his anger it pained him to feel that he was wounding the heart of the woman that he called mother. "Eleanor knows how to avoid being locked up there," he said. "She has only to answer my questions.

"I cannot answer them," Nora said again. But this time the words were addressed to her grandmother, who, in return, studied her face as attentively, and more intelligently, than her father had done.

"James," she said, suddenly, "the Bible says: 'He moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform,' and it's so; yes, it's so. In old days, too, they used to put His messengers into lions' dens, but we've grown merciful. We only jest chuck 'em into dark holes where the centipedes and scorpions and tarantlers can play hide-and-seek over 'em;" with which parting shot she turned about and started back to the house, while Nora and her father continued on their way to the root cellar.

This cellar was a dark excavation in the side of the gully bank, at some distance from the house. In New Mexico, as in Southern Colorado, it is not customary for the people to construct cellars underneath their houses, as in more frigid climates, and this lack is made up, in a measure, by building various kinds of dens, which might not inaptly be described as caches, where such perishable articles as milk, butter, vegetables and fruits are kept. If there chances to be a hillside near the ranch house, the proprietor's task is easy. He

merely excavates a space of the dimensions that seem to him requisite for the purpose, and the cellar is done. It is not always considered necessary, even, to add a window to the one bit of architecture—the door—but the Carrols were progressive. The small cavern dug out of the gully side, close to the towering rock that served in stormy times as a kind of wind-break, had a single strong window, as well as door. The cellar had fallen into disuse, chiefly on account of its inconvenient distance from the house, and the window, for some reason best known to Mr. Carrol, had been banked up with earth and straw to such a height that not the smallest ray of daylight could penetrate the interior. The place was, as Mrs. Easton said, infested by vermin of many sorts—a fact of which Mr. Carrol was perfectly well aware, but which he was, at the time, too indignant to consider seriously. One of the greatest drawbacks, as he knew, to the exploration of the ruined homes of the Cliff Dwellers, not so far away, was that the ruins had virtually been taken possession of by rattlesnakes and adders ready at a moment's notice to hiss a venomous challenge to the hardy adventurer who should dare to disturb their torpid ease.

Reaching the cellar, Mr. Carrol, without more words, unlocked the door, pushed his shrinking daughter inside, and, relocking it, pocketed the key and walked away without the aid of his crutch, which he had forgotten; and without limping, for he had also forgotten his injury.

Left alone in a place so dark and gloomy that she had always, even with the radiant sunshine of New Mexico streaming in at the open door and gilding its remotest corners, entered it with a kind of half formed dread, Nora stood quite still until, her eyes becoming accustomed to the darkness, she made out the dim outline of an upturned butter firkin, on which she presently seated herself, with a shuddering recollection that the dark cavern underneath it would be the place, of all others, that a tarantula would like best for a permanent abode. And there were always little tarantulas in their permanent abodes. As for centipedes—as she leaned forward, peering helplessly into the darkness, a lock of her own soft hair slid straying over one of the hands that were clasped around her knees, and she screamed aloud. Then, realizing what it was, she blushed with shame at her own cowardice. But she was terribly overwrought and unnerved; she had been, as her grandmother said, suffering from sleepless nights and torturing dreams. As she cowered silently in the thick darkness, her fancy began to revert more and more to those dreams, and the other tormenting thought that had at first oppressed her, was thrust further into the background. She had begun to realize that her plan had been a foolish, ill-considered, indefensible one, but she ceased to care for that now. "I know that there is such a place as the Land of Dreadful Dreams," she murmured, shuddering, and staring wide-eyed into the velvety blackness, "and I wouldn't a bit wonder if places like this are kind of gateways that the creatures that live in it creep out through."

She sat a long time—or what seemed to her a long time—considering this view of her dreamland experiences rather than the more directly personal problem which should, it would seem, have claimed her attention.

By the time that certain soft little sounds, as of bits of falling earth—the sound being smothered, as if it might be a long way off, over in the direction of the window—began to come to her ears, she was far enough advanced on her dangerous journey into the unknown to recoil with dumb terror from every sound, half expecting that it would be immediately followed by some tangible creation, some pursuing phantom that, claiming her for prey, should drag her bodily into that formless, terrible void, The Land of Dreadful Dreams.

CHAPTER XX.

Mr. Carrol Decides to Interview Valdez.

RUPERT had sat, a silent listener, during the interview between Nora and her father. When Nora admitted that she knew, but yet refused to tell where the Jersey was, the whole of her poor, little, unselfish "plan," with its fatal lack of business sense, was suddenly clear to him. She had bribed Valdez to spare his son, and the bribe that she gave was her beloved heifer. Something else was made clear to Rupert—something that he had never before fully comprehended—and that was the love, the absolute devotion that his sister felt for him, and her unquestioning faith that, some time, "when he felt like it, when he was ready," he would explain everything and accept the consequences, whatever they might be. To Nora, he knew that such an admission, however long delayed, would seem the act of a hero. He neither looked at nor spoke to his sister as she followed their father, sobbing, on the way to an imprisonment that, to the boy who knew her so well, seemed as terrible as it really was. More could scarcely be said.

There was a long mirror in the room; when Mrs. Easton ran out in the vain attempt to intercede for Nora, Rupert walked across the room and stood before it, looking steadily at the image reflected therein. What another, standing beside him, and following the direction of his eyes, would have seen, was the likeness of a very handsome and manly-looking boy of sixteen, or thereabout; but it was not with the outward form that Rupert concerned himself, and, certainly, the image did not strike him as that of a hero. Looking gloomily into the eyes that looked gloomily back into his, he said aloud: "She did it for you, and she will die before she will betray you. Oh, you coward! You coward! You coward!" But the look on his face, as he turned away from the glass, was not that of a coward.

Leaving the cellar, with Nora safely bestowed behind lock and key, Mr. Carrol walked directly to the stable, mounted the bay colt—mounted, not without being painfully reminded that he still had use for his forgotten crutch—and rode swiftly away toward the Valdez cabin. If he had taken the short cut along the dry bed of the gully that had the day before served to let Cosme unobserved out on to the plains, he must have passed the Mexican's corral, where he would have seen the Jersey, and so would have been spared some hours of remorseful anguish.

There were no such fripperies as fence, gateway or walk to mar the primitive simplicity of the Valdez abode; accordingly, Mr. Carrol rode straight up to the door, which stood open, and called for Valdez. The summons was answered by Valdez' wife, a slatternly woman with a pair of shifty black eyes that told their own story as to where Cosme got his skill in deceit. In reply to Mr. Carrol's inquiry for her husband, the señora informed him that Valdez had but that moment started for the Half Circle A-Bar Ranch, a dozen or more miles to the north, and that he was not expected to return for some days—it might be weeks, as he was to assist those cattlemen in rounding up a widely scattered herd of several thousand head of cattle.

"How long did you say he had been gone?" asked Mr. Carrol, with an anxious glance toward the north, where a heavy storm was gathering—had already gathered and broken, indeed—for the muffled roll of distant thunder came distinctly to their ears.

Señora Valdez cast her black eyes up at an imaginary, invisible sun, for the sky above them was overcast. "He was gone five min'," she announced, after a little consideration of that quarter of the heavens where she supposed the sun to be.

"Five minutes? Then I can easily overtake him." He reined the colt around, but lingered to explain to Señora Valdez: "I'm anxious to have him look around for my

"Then I can easily overtake him," he said, reining the colt around.

Jersey heifer; she's missing this morning."

"Si!" murmured Cosme's mother, folding her small brown hands demurely in her scarlet apron. "Si, señor." Leaning against the door frame, she continued to regard the rider placidly as he struck spurs to the colt, who went loping away into the heart of the rain clouds that were rolling rapidly down to meet him; but, out of the corner of her eye, she cast an oblique glance toward the corral, and congratulated herself that its walls were high.

Furiously angry, to all appearances, at Nora's persistent refusal to explain her conduct, Mr. Carrol had decided to carry out the first idea that had suggested itself to him, and to employ Valdez to trace the heifer, which could not be far away, no matter into whose possession it had passed. Let him once find out where she was, and, he told himself, he would have her back, even if he were obliged to go to law about it. A minor like Nora had no right to dispose of property—anyone ought to know that. As the bay colt pounded on, mile after mile, Mr. Carrol began to think of the old saw, "First catch your hare,"—the hare, in this case, being an able-bodied Mexican mounted on a fleet-footed cowpony, and with fully two hours' start of the lame man on the lumbering colt.

Señora Valdez' estimates of the subdivisions of time were always more confident than accurate, and, in this case, her only regret, as she cuddled her arms comfortably in the scarlet apron, and continued to watch the vanishing rider, was that she had not said two minutes instead of five; all the more, then, would the white señor have felt encouraged to keep up a chase that she knew was bound to prove entirely futile. It did not seem to her, however, that it mattered in the least where the Señor Carrol went, so that he went far enough, and fast enough, away from the vicinity of the Valdez corral. A slow, meditative smile stirred her lips as she glanced toward the north and at the dark masses of clouds charged with a deluge of rain. She thought of the Elescalante Arroyo, a narrow, rocky gully, miles in length, that cut across the road between their cottage and the Half Circle A-Bar Ranch, like the gash of an unhealed wound on the surface of the plains. Down its almost perpendicular walls a horse must zigzag cutiously at any time, and, even after a short rain, let alone such a waterspout as the coming storm promised to be, the pent-up waters in its narrow bed transformed the dry gully in a few minutes to a raging torrent, impassable for man or beast. "If Señor Carrol crosses over beyon' the Elescalante when the rain it is comin', he will stay beyon' it when that the rain it is come," Señora Valdez assured herself, and sat down inside the doorway to roll a cigaret, while waiting for the rain that presently forced her to close the door.

Carrol had ridden five or six miles before the pain in his ankle became so insupportable that even his stoicism could no longer ignore it. Besides, he had not yet caught the faintest glimpse of the man whom he was following. The plains just about him were undulating, and he thought that if he could but force himself to hold out until he reached the top of the next rise, which commanded a long stretch of level land, he must surely see and be able to signal Valdez. Between him and the top of the next rise, however, lay the Elescalante Arroyo; down its steep sides he urged his horse at a snail's pace, dashed through the sandy bottom, crept up the opposite bank, and reached the desired point at last, only to be met by a deluge of rain, driven before a wind so fierce that it nearly took away his breath. Before its sweeping advance the whole landscape was rendered an indistinguishable blur, almost instantly; he could not have seen Valdez then if he had been within twenty rods of him, instead of being, as he was at that moment, snugly ensconced in the kitchen of the

Half Circle A-Bar. As the rain dashed over him, Mr. Carrol turned in his saddle to look for his "slicker," or waterproof coat, a necessary part of the range rider's equipment, which is usually carried in a compact roll, attached to the saddle. The slicker was not in its accustomed place, which fact considerably surprised its owner. To his knowledge the saddle had not been in use since the day of his accident, and he distinctly remembered dismounting on that day, just before reaching the round-up camp, to tie the slicker more securely to it. Rupert had, in fact, untied the coat and tossed it aside as an unnecessary encumbrance on the night of that disastrous ride, and had forgotten to replace it on his return.

Not finding the coat, Mr. Carrol looked about for some place of shelter. His plains training told him that a storm of such violence must inevitably be of short duration, and he preferred to await its passing, to getting thoroughly drenched. He had, by this time, again reached the arroyo; riding part way down its steep bank, he came to a ledge of overhanging rock close beside the trail. Dismounting, he hastily divested the horse of saddle and blanket, tossed them under the protecting rock, and followed them, not a minute too soon. The rain was now descending in long, slanting, solid sheets, that beat upon the hard ground and the nearby rocks with the loud impact of descending hail-stones. There was no room for the colt under the ledge, but Mr. Carrol clung to his bridle and scolded him roundly as he pulled and fretted, twisting about in a vain attempt to obtain shelter from the pitiless fury of the storm. Mr. Carrol had no instinct for animals; he did not understand them, and his love for Snowflake had been fully as much the pride of ownership as of any real appreciation of the exceptionally fine qualities of the mare. If it had been Rupert crouching under a rock to escape the storm which his horse must weather without shelter, he would have talked commiseratingly with the animal, would have aroused in him, if he had not been utterly stupid—which the bay colt probably was—a feeling of loyalty, of devotion, that would have precluded the possibility of desertion. But it was Rupert's father, and, at a peculiarly determined tug that the colt gave the bit in the effort to turn his hind quarters where his head should be, Mr. Carrol gave him a resounding slap on the cheek. The colt, already more enraged than even his irritable master, reared, struck out with his iron-shod hoofs—fortunately missing his aim—but startling Mr. Carrol into dropping his hold of the bridle; then, whirling around, he went tearing straight down the bank, through the arroyo bottom—where the water, thick with foam and débris, was already above his fetlocks—dashed up the opposite bank, and so, with bridle reins dragging, struck out for home and shelter, as straight as the crow flies.

Mr. Carrol, for the moment utterly dismayed, crouched back under the rock, wondering how he was to get home. He had neither seen the water in the arroyo, nor heard, above the roar of the falling rain, the splashing made by the colt's hoofs as he dashed through it. He sat for a long time wondering and thinking with growing apprehension of poor Nora, locked up in the noisome root cellar, and afraid of the dark, before he awoke to the imminent danger of his own position.

The wind had gone down, the rain had ceased, and he started to leave the shelter of the rock, when a sound reached his ear that brought to his face an awful, indescribable change—such a change as might come to one, who, utterly unsuspecting, finds himself suddenly face to face with death. He had heard a sound like the voice of many waters, and he knew instantly what it meant. Imprisoned within the narrow, rocky confines of the arroyo, a flood was coming—a flood that caused the very earth to tremble, as it swept resistlessly along its

course—and he was crouching under a rock half way down the arroyo bank—the bank farthest from his home.

A flood? He himself had stood on the other bank, one day, and seen a black wall of water, fifteen feet high, sweep down the arroyo, bearing everything before it. It came on that occasion from a cloudburst up in the mountains, and he had watched the phenomenal rapidity of its advance with absorbed interest. Within two minutes the narrow, dry creek was a dry creek no longer; it was so full that little dashes of foam, torn from the waves by the swiftness of their advance, were tossed to his very feet as he had stood upon the bank. And now—now he was nearer to the bottom of the gully than to its top, and the waters were upon him.

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CHAPTER XXI.

A Riderless Horse.

AFTER that brief, scornful survey of his own face and figure as revealed in the mirror, Rupert hurried from the room. He was going out to the cellar, intent on securing Nora's release by a straightforward recital of the whole story, when the sound of clattering hoof-beats down the road drew his attention in that direction. The lively rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat came from the hurrying feet of the bay colt, and he was carrying his master toward the Valdez cabin. Rupert understood at once what that meant.

"But he'll get nothing out of old Valdez," he told himself, thoughtfully. "Valdez isn't owning up, to any great extent, when it comes to a property deal in which he gets the best of it."

For an instant he was tempted to ride after his father and confess all before his father could meet Valdez, but a moment's reflection convinced him that this would be useless. While it could not possibly benefit Nora, it might cause his father to discredit his story, since it might appear to him that he (Rupert) feared to have him talk with Valdez. After lingering irresolutely about for a little, he at length turned his steps again toward the cellar where Nora was imprisoned. Reminding himself that his father had neither forbidden anyone to go near Nora, nor yet to look in upon her—if they could—he began industriously digging out the half-rotted straw that was piled over the window. It was the faint, muffled sound of this digging that Nora heard when she imagined that some familiar demon might be creeping in upon her from the Land of Dreams. In his haste, Rupert had not stopped to supply himself with proper implements for the purpose, but was digging out and throwing the straw aside with his bare hands. Suddenly, with an involuntary cry, he sprang backward; he had found on the outside of the cellar what poor Nora, on the inside, was thinking of with sick apprehension. The last handful of straw, on being removed, had unearthed a nest of tarantulas. The great, hairy, repulsive-looking mother spider straightened up on her eight long legs, and seemed to Rupert to glare menacingly at him before she scuttled out of sight, while the rotten straw was suddenly alive with miniature copies of herself, scampering off in all directions. Luckily, Rupert's hands had not touched the poisonous creatures, but he shuddered as he realized the narrowness of his escape.

Nora had not known of his presence until his cry attracted her attention. She got up and hurried over to the window. "Rupert, Rupert! Was that you?" she called, eagerly.

"Yes; go away from the window, Nora." His voice had an unusual sound that filled Nora with vague alarm.

"What is the matter, Rupert?" she persisted, pressing still closer to the window behind which, inside or out, as Rupert knew, a legion of fighting tarantulas, aroused and on the alert, were hiding.

If one should bite her—there in that hole from which there was no escape, and in the dark—Rupert believed that she would either faint away or go into convulsions; she might, in fact, do either, if he so much as told her what he had just seen.

"Nora!" he shouted, sternly, raising his voice to make it the more impressive, "get back from the window, as I tell you; mind me, now!"

"I will," came the answer. And Nora stumbled back to her seat on the butter firkin, wondering what had made Rupert so cross, but feeling a warm glow of thankfulness that he had come.

Meanwhile, Rupert, having stopped long enough to get a pitchfork, was again at work at the window, and Nora had scarcely seated herself when a long shaft of daylight entering dispelled the darkness of her prison. A few more turns of the pitchfork, and the window was cleared. Then Rupert, with an eye out for tarantulas, which still remained invisible, pressed his face against the grimy panes. "Hello, Nora! How goes it?"

"Pretty well," replied his sister, joyfully, all her fears taking wing with the advent of light and Rupert. "Didn't you cry out?" she added. "I was sure I heard you."

"I had to cry out, didn't I, to make you hear?"

"Oh, but your voice sounded strange."

"So did yours; anyone's would through a few tons of dirt and straw, I reckon."

"Did father say you might—" began Nora, anxiously, and stopped.

"Might blast for you? No, it's my own idea entirely."

"It's awful good of you. I don't see what makes me so cowardly. I was just sick with fright before I heard you."

"I was nearly sick with fright after I heard you," thought Rupert, but prudently forbore to say so; instead he remarked, "Well, Nora, you seem to have gone into the cattle business on your own account. Hadn't you better take me into partnership?"

Nora, to her brother's secret distress, had drawn nearer to the window, but, as he was pretty sure that the tarantula and her family were snugly bestowed in the recesses of a small, round hole, just underneath the window-casing, he merely put his hoof heel on the hole and made no reference to it. The momentary relief occasioned by Rupert's presence had again given place in Nora to the dull, benumbing pain that his silence when she was punished had caused. She made no reply, and Rupert went on:

"You had better take me into partnership, as far as telling me all about it goes; you really had, Nora."

Nora hesitated. "You must know, Rupert," she said, at last.

"Oh, I reckon I know, pretty well," was the answer, "but I'd like to hear the details."

Nora gave him the details, accordingly, and at the conclusion of her story asked abruptly: "Where's father?"

"He's gone over to see Valdez, I believe. I saw him riding off in that direction."

A pang shot through Nora's heart at these words. Rupert had risked nothing in coming to her; perhaps he would not have come if their father had been at home. Still, true to her determination to shield him at all hazards, she broke out hurriedly: "You had better pile the straw back against the window again and go away, Rupert; father will be angry again if he finds that you have been letting light in here."

"Don't you worry, sis," returned Rupert, stooping to pick up a small stone which he planted securely over the mouth of the tarantula's residence. "I'm going to let light into some other places than this cellar." There was no mistaking the tone in which this was said, even though the words came, muffled and faint, through the barrier between them.

Nora pressed up close to the window on

her side; there was a triumphant ring in her voice as she spoke. "Are you, Rupert? Are you, really? Oh, I am so glad!"

"That's all right; but you're not in a particularly joyful setting. I wish you would keep back from the window."

"Why?" Nora stared about the little opening in surprise. "There's nothing wrong about it that I can see," she urged.

"You don't know; maybe the sills are rotten. It might cave in after my taking the straw away, so."

"It seems safe, and the walls are so thick," Nora persisted, lingering.

"Say, I'll tell you what I'll do!" exclaimed Rupert, suddenly starting back himself, as he caught a glimpse of a set of long, hairy legs that seemed to be quivering on the verge of a spring, while the phenomenally bright eyes of their owner regarded him attentively from the shelter of a crevice in the rotten window-ledge. "You go and sit down on that old firkin and keep away from the window, and I'll get my violin and play for you; that'll be better than trying to talk this way."

"So it will," Nora agreed, happily. She was no longer fearful that her father would be offended with her for consenting to any alleviation of her imprisonment, since Rupert was ready to explain. "You haven't played for a long time," she added, and instantly regretted what might seem like an unnecessary reference to the late trouble. In her reliance on her brother, the trouble was already relegated to the past, no matter what the outcome of Rupert's revelation. With her, the trouble had been for long, not the loss of property, but the cloud upon Rupert's integrity.

Rupert, who was already half way to the stable, had not heard the remark, and it was but a moment before he reappeared with the violin under his arm. During his absence, however, brief as it was, Nora's attention had been attracted by a sound like that made by a heavy rain. She had promised to keep away from the window, and she could catch no glimpse of the world outside through the dirt-encrusted panes. "It can't be rain," she thought. "If it was, I should see drops on the glass."

It had escaped her notice that, as the cellar faced the south, owing to the shelter of the cliff-like hill on the north, as well as to that of the great rock beside the window, the bit of level space in front of it would be nearly as well protected as it would have been had there been a roof over it. While she was still wondering, Rupert's face appeared at the window.

"Here we are; now you just sit still and listen to the entertainment."

"But wait—wait, Rupert!" In her anxiety Nora again approached the window, and Rupert began, rather ostentatiously, to replace the violin in the case that he had just taken it from.

"You promised to keep away from the window," he observed.

"Oh, I will!" cried Nora, retreating, hastily. "But I thought—I think—I heard rain."

"Which, having good ears, you certainly did, and probably do," replied Rupert, seating himself composedly on a convenient projection of rock, and proceeding to tune his violin.

"*Is* it raining?"

"Hard."

"I'm afraid you'll get wet, Rupert dear. It's so good of you to offer to play for me, but I can't bear to have you get wet."

"And I can't bear to have my violin get wet; that's the reason why I'm going to sit right here where there can't a drop of water touch me."

"And there's father," observed Nora, sorrowfully. "It's the first time he's been out since his accident. He'll be sure to get a soaking."

Rupert, who had purposely placed himself so that, while playing, he might have an eye on the road by which his father would return, made no reply, and not many minutes had passed before Nora, listening

entranced to the waves of melody beating their way upward against the strong, drowning rush of the rain, became oblivious of her surroundings and all beside. Rupert did not forget; while to all appearances as completely absorbed in the music as Nora herself, he yet kept a sharp lookout, not only on the tarantula-infested corner by the window, but upon the roadway.

He was resolved not to lose a minute in acquainting his father with the real motive for Nora's late business transaction, and with the real facts in regard to Snowflake's disappearance. It seemed strange to him now—he who had so lately shrunk like a guilty coward from accepting the consequences of his own bad acts—that such an intolerable, crushing load had been lifted from his heart by the mere resolve to do what was right, at any cost.

"It's all Nora's doings," he thought, gratefully. "Why, I might have been a hunted criminal by now, but for her!"

Half an hour passed, then the melody that the boy's wizard fingers were evoking from the instrument stopped with a discordant jar that brought Nora out of a blissful trance, and made her jump in alarm. "What's the matter? How you startled me!" she cried.

"Did I?" returned Rupert, stooping to pick up the bow that had slipped from his fingers. "I just dropped my bow, that's all." He strove to speak quietly in spite of his quickened pulses and throbbing heart. "I'm going away for a few minutes," he added, and was gone.

"In the rain?" protested Nora, but to no purpose. Rupert was already on his way to the stable, beside which, vaguely outlined against a blurring background of rain, the bay colt had suddenly appeared, riderless.

CHAPTER XXII.

Mrs. Easton Releases the Captive.

MRS. EASTON had also seen the riderless horse, and, as Rupert reached the stable, she came hurrying out. The wind caught her loosened gray hair and sent it streaming out behind like a defiant banner; the rain pelted her face and her uncovered head, but she did not heed such minor discomforts.

"Now," she panted, breathlessly, as she reached the boy's side, "I don't expect nothin' but what a jedgment has overtook us all! There's been some dark carryin's on here lately, and the punishment for 'em has come; it has come—the heft of it—on James Carrol, where it don't all belong, not by no means!" The tears mingled with the raindrops that streamed down her ruddy cheeks as she wrung her hands in helpless distress. "Oh, how true is the words of Mr. Watts when he says, 'Oh, what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive!'"

"Confound it all!" cried Rupert, goaded to fury, "I wish that Mr. Watts had broken his neck before ever he took to writing verses! He's got one pat for every breath that I draw."

"Don't talk about broken necks, child," his grandmother admonished him tremulously. "We've like got one in our family, this minute. What are you going to do?"

"Why, I'm going out to look for father, of course. He went toward the Valdez place."

"Can I help you any?"

"Yes, just hang on to the colt's bridle, while I put a saddle on to Vidette." He had his own pony out of the stable, and the saddle on her back, almost before his grandmother comprehended what he was about.

An instant more and the cinches were drawn taut, and Rupert, with a motion light and swift as a bird taking wing, was in the saddle.

"Give me that bridle," he said, leaning down from his saddle to snatch it. "Now, grandma, do go in and get your wet clothes off. And don't worry. Don't you see that the colt has just given father the slip in some way. If father had been thrown, the saddle would be on the horse yet."

There was comfort as well as good sense in this reasoning. Mrs. Easton looked after the vanishing trio a moment, revolving it, then she walked away, but not toward the house. Her garments were streaming—a fact of which she appeared to be utterly unconscious—as she approached the root cellar. She had been perfectly cognizant of Rupert's whereabouts and occupation since his father's departure, and both had met with her entire approval. Now, she felt, it was time for her to act; Rupert might be mistaken. "If James *is* lost, or even if he's hurt," she reflected, struggling against the wind that whipped her wet garments about her legs in what seemed like a determined effort to impede her progress, "in the excitement and suspense that's sure to follow, nobody 'll think of asking him for the key to the cellar, or even of lookin' in his pockets for it; and he put it in his coat pocket, I noticed that. Like enough he's lost his coat as well as himself, and that poor girl locked up out there all alone!"

She had by this time reached the woodpile, where she stopped long enough to pick up an axe. "'Necessity knows no law.' I've heard that lots of times," she reflected, plunging recklessly on in more senses than one. "If James was alive, or even if he ain't killed, he'd thank me for rememberin' Eleanor, when everyone else loses their heads and forgets all about her!"

She was not at all surprised, on reaching the cellar, to find the straw removed from the blocked-up window. Taking refuge beside the sheltering rock, she called: "Eleanor, Eleanor! Be you alive, my darling?"

Nora, seated on the firkin in the middle of the cellar, had been straining her ears to catch any sound above the persistent dash of the rain. In spite of his attempted lightness, there had been a note of alarm in Rupert's voice which Nora was quick to detect. She was very uneasy, but she could not help smiling at her grandmother's anxious inquiry.

"Yes, grandma, I'm alive yet," she responded, cheerfully. "It isn't much past dinner time, is it? I couldn't have starved to death yet, you know."

"I'm glad you're alive, child. I guess we're goin' to need you," remarked the old lady, ambiguously.

"Has father got back? And where did Rupert go?" questioned Nora, eagerly.

Both questions were hard to answer, but, knowing that she must be able to offer, to the prisoner herself, some sufficient excuse for what she was about to do, Mrs. Easton had resolved to tell the truth, or as nearly the truth as she could, in her present state of excitement and distress, approximate it. "Rupert has gone after his father," she explained. "He's young, but he may be able to save him, for all that."

"Gone after father!" Nora came to the window and pressed her face against the panes. "What can you mean, grandma?"

"Oh, it's all plain!" returned the old lady, with a whimper. "It's a jedgment, that's what it is. He came home flyin', with the bridle on, and covered with mud, and—"

Nora gave a cry of anguish. "Oh, grandma! What has happened? What *has* happened? Why did father come home with the bridle on?"

"I didn't say that, child. I said he came home without a rider."

"*Who* came home without a rider, grandma?" Nora implored.

"The bay colt, of course. Who else should come, except your father, and he's been left behind somewhere—the Lord above knows where, or how—but this I'm sure of: I'll do my duty, just as James would wish me to, if he was alive and lookin'

down on me from heaven—or wherever he is—this minute! Stand back, Eleanor—away back, at the other side of the cellar."

Nora obey, wondering what was coming next. She was not long left in doubt. Raising the axe, Mrs. Easton brought it down on the window with a resounding blow that effectually shattered all the glass and nearly all the sash. The blow was followed by a rush of delicious, rain-washed air. Nora inhaled it gratefully; she had not before realized how rank and noisome the atmosphere of the cellar had been. But she trembled for the possible consequences of her grandmother's bold act. Her grandmother was not trembling in the least; she was cautiously removing more sash.

"Oh, grandma! I—I'm afraid father will be so angry!" Nora faltered.

"You forgit that James is killed, most likely—or, at any rate, badly hurt—and he'll be thankful enough, in either case, as I said before, to have any responsibility taken off his shoulders; besides," she went on, relentlessly, "if he's killed, and his relicts is found, it's goin' to tax all our minds to see to the funeral as it ought to be seen to, and you'll be needed somewhere else than in this cellar."

In her heart of hearts, Mrs. Easton was, even at that moment, in spite of her uncertainty as to his fate, so angry with her son-in-law, and so bitterly resented his treatment of Nora, that there was more than a suggestion of resignation in the tone in which she spoke of making arrangements for his funeral. But at these words, Nora had burst into such passionate weeping that the sound of her sobs brought her grandmother to her better senses.

"There, there, there, child! Do stop cryin' so! I don't think that James is killed—Lord forbid! But he may be hurt, and if he is, you'll be needed at the house. Come now, climb right out here; be careful of the glass."

Stifling her sobs, and stepping gingerly around the splintered mass of glass, Nora reached the aperture where the window had so lately been, and crept cautiously through. It had stopped raining almost as suddenly as it began, and the late afternoon sun was lighting up the rain-drenched landscape as they walked back to the house together.

Mrs. Easton then proceeded to change her wet clothing, while Nora busied herself in the preparation of a belated dinner, which she could not herself touch, although earnestly admonished to do so by Mrs. Easton, who declared it her duty to keep herself inwardly strengthened for whatever calamity might be in store for them. Discouraged by Nora's want of appetite, the old lady abandoned her own efforts in behalf of an inward strength.

"There's that Cosme," she remarked, pushing away her plate. "He's been makin' one excuse and another for hoverin' around the house all day; he'll eat all there is left, and lick the platter clean, if there was a ton of it."

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CHAPTER XXIII.

Nora is Ordered Back to the Cellar.

FROM his shelter under the rock, in the bank of the arroyo, Mr. Carrol gave one all-comprehending look at the wall of water which, filling the narrow space from bank to bank, was sweeping down upon him.

Realizing instantly that escape by way of the trail was now impossible, he began to climb straight up the nearly perpendicular side of the gully. His ankle, swollen and inflamed from the exertion of the ride, had been paining him most intolerably but the instant before, but now in his frantic struggle for life he forgot the injury. Twice he tried to gain a foothold in the crumbling, rotten earth that slumped spiritlessly away beneath his feet, sending him sprawling and staggering back to his start-

ing point, with the roaring waters coming closer, closer, until the first wild bursts of spray were tossed upward so far that his blanched cheeks were wet with it. Mr. Carrol was not a praying man, but suddenly his own voice sounded, unexpectedly, in his ears:

"O God, please help me out! Don't—don't let me die here while my poor child is being unjustly punished. Help me!"

Once more he struggled up the bank—up, and up, still higher, until a nimble spring landed him on top of the rock that had sheltered him, and, reaching up, he was able to grasp the tough roots of a cedar tree that, defying drought and flood, clung tenaciously to the side of the arroyo. Up he struggled, slipped, and grasped the tree trunk just in time to save himself; another upward scramble, and his arms were around the sturdy trunk of another cedar growing on the very verge of the bank itself, and here the water caught him. With a roar like that of some savage beast clutching its prey, it caught and lifted him upon its dizzying current; it threshed him to and fro, up and down; it beat him with fragments of driftwood, and once it swept resistlessly over his helpless head; and then, as he clung, strangling and blinded, the water was falling. In five minutes it was lower than his shoulders; in ten it was so much lower that, after one or two cautious efforts, Mr. Carrol succeeded in extricating himself from its current and climbing out upon the bank. He sat down in the grateful warmth of the sun, and watched the brown water swirl past until it was so nearly spent that he knew, if his foot had not been throbbing so painfully that it was almost impossible to move, that he might easily wade across the little thread of water still left in the arroyo, and so hobble on toward home. He had about decided to try it, pain or no pain, and was speculatively eying the cedar in quest of a possible straight branch in the midst of its distorted ugliness, when a shout from the opposite bank drew his attention, and there was Rupert with his horse.

Rupert had gone first to the Valdez ranch, but, having an unfortunate fancy for short-cuts, he had taken a little-used trail across the mesa which brought him out near the Valdez corral. Looking into this enclosure as he rode past, he saw Nora's pet Jersey, plainly very ill at ease, walking around and around the enclosure in a vain attempt to find some point of egress. The sight filled him with a fresh sense of shame and humiliation, but his face betrayed nothing of it as, riding up to the door, he accosted the señora, asking if she had seen anything of his father.

"Yo' padre ride away, so," replied Señora Valdez, waving a small brown hand vaguely in the direction of the Cimarron.

"Where? Where was he going, do you know?" demanded Rupert, anxiously.

Occasionally, when there was nothing to be gained by doing otherwise, and when the infrequent impulse seized her, Señora Valdez had been known to tell the truth. Some such vague, irresponsible impulse seized her now, and she gave Rupert the information he sought, adding, with a beatific smile:

"Rain come hard at de norf; make Elescalante Arroyo to hold muchos waters; yo' padre, if he pass arroyo befor' water come, no come back so fas' as he come over."

So, keeping a sharp lookout along the road, lest the colt might have escaped his father before the arroyo was reached, Rupert pushed on, reaching the gully, as has been said, at the moment that his father had decided to try crossing it on foot.

Mr. Carrol, as his son rode across the stream and led the bay colt again to his side, was a pitiful figure. Splashed with mud from head to foot, stiff and aching in every joint, while the concentrated essence of all pain seemed to be in his ankle, he was unable to mount the horse unassisted, but suffered Rupert to help him up on a

rock, from which vantage he at length gained the saddle. After learning how the colt had come home, and, as a result, how Rupert had had the good fortune to strike his trail so soon, Mr. Carrol spoke but once during the dreary homeward ride, and that was to observe, as they were passing the Valdez ranch:

"I daresay Eleanor thinks she's been in the cellar a week, at least; time passes slowly to anyone in the dark."

"Or to anyone in the water," Rupert interposed wickedly. It did not seem to him that his father realized the full severity of the punishment that he was inflicting on Nora—and the punishment was undeserved. The instant that they reached home and his father had been made comfortable, he would make his confession. Looking at the suffering man beside him, he wished that the confession was already made and he in Nora's place, if that would be any satisfaction to his father, but he had a feeling that no such childish measures would be considered meet for his offense.

When they reached the house, Mrs. Easton came hurrying out to meet them, followed more slowly by Nora, on whom her father's eyes rested with a look of surprise and displeasure; but he was in too great distress to ask any questions just then, or to listen to any explanations, had they been offered. Not until a bath, a change of clothing and a liberal application of the contents of the camphor bottle to the injured ankle, followed by a warm meal, had, in a measure, restored him, did he address Nora. She had been active in ministering to his comfort; when that was reëstablished he turned to her:

"How is it that I find you here, when I left you locked in the cellar?" he asked.

Before Nora could reply, her grandmother hastened to answer the question, as well as a number of others that she thought Mr. Carrol might eventually ask:

"How is it that she's here? Because I let her out."

"How?"

"I broke in the window. You see, James, we—I got the idea that you might be in great trouble—why, I even thought you might have been killed, and I knew, of course, that if you was, you would need Nora to wait on you. I felt that, for your sake, it would be best to have her on hand. She wasn't very willin' to come, I'll say that much—not but what she'd be willin' to wait on you if you was killed, or alive, either, for that matter—but she seemed to think, almost, that I hadn't ought to 'a' let her out. That wasn't exactly right in her, you'll admit yourself, James. Old as I am, I hope I know right from wrong!"

"You don't seem to have known it in this case," was the stern comment.

As one result of the day's exciting events, Mrs. Easton was really overwrought, and very tired. As Mr. Carrol spoke, her gray head drooped. It seemed a bitter mockery of their general utility that now, when she so sorely needed their aid, no supporting text or quotation from Mr. Watts came to her mind. Vanquished as much by her own weariness as by her son-in-law's unrelenting attitude, she buried her face in the folds of her gingham apron and sobbed as helplessly as any schoolgirl.

Nora, from her seat near the window, looked at her pityingly, longing to go to her side and comfort her, but afraid to move lest her father should be still further affronted.

Rupert, springing to his feet, had taken a step toward his grandmother, when his father called out sharply: "Sit down, Rupert!" As the boy obeyed, he went on angrily: "Why, what's the matter, in my own house, that I am disobeyed behind my back and defied to my face! Eleanor, as it was your grandmother who let you out—and you had no business to come, you know that—but as she let you out, and your being shut up seems to worry her, you may stay out if you are ready to tell me all about that trade of yours." He paused an

"Sit down Rupert," he said in a changed voice.

instant, and, as Nora made no response, went on hurriedly: "If you don't like to speak before your grandmother and Rupert—"

"It isn't that, father," Nora said, tremulously. "If—if I could tell you at all, I would not mind speaking before them."

"Very well, then," said her father, quietly. "Rupert, go out and board up that window again; take some of those inch planks and fasten them up with spikes. Get my crutch from the bedroom, and I'll take Eleanor out. You've been a good and obedient girl till now, Eleanor," he continued, addressing poor Nora, who sat regarding him in a kind of dumb amazement, "and that's all the stronger reason why you should be well punished—do you understand—well punished, for this."

It was noticeable, for all the haste and heat with which he spoke, that Mr. Carrol's eyes, as he said this, were not upon the cowering culprit, but upon his son.

"The—heif—heif—heifer was hers!" sobbed Mrs. Easton.

"It ain't the loss of the heifer that I mind; you know that, mother. It's the contemptible secrecy and slyness of the act itself."

Rupert, who had been waiting an opportunity to speak, and, like a greyhound in leash, quivering with impatience, now broke in with kindling eyes: "Don't use such terms as sly and contemptible when you are speaking of Nora, father. Nora! When you hear what I'm going to tell you, you'll —you'll feel like kissing the hem of her garment, as I do. Father, it is her unselfish bravery that has shamed your cowardly son into speaking the truth; don't worry Nora any more about that heifer. I know where she is, and why she is there."

Mrs. Easton, her tears suddenly dried, put down her apron and fixed her eyes on the boy who stood paling and flushing under his father's searching look, while Nora, clasping her hands, leaned forward in an attitude of breathless attention. Mr. Carrol sank back in his chair and drew a long sigh—a sigh which sounded very much like one of relief, while an expression of painful perplexity that had become almost habitual to his face, of late, suddenly vanished.

"Sit down, Rupert," he said, in a changed voice. "If you've got anything to tell, I reckon we're all ready and willing to hear it."

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CHAPTER XXIV.

Unraveling a Web.

RUPERT seated himself, as requested, but before beginning his story, he volunteered the seemingly irrelevant information:

"There's a nest of tarantulas under the window-ledge of the root cellar. I put a stone over it; please remember, all of you, not to move it."

His father nodded, and Mrs. Easton remarked, *sotto voce:*

"A teakittle full of bilin' water 'll settle their business."

Nora was silent, and her air of intent listening did not relax. Rupert's story was just then of more interest to her than the fact that she had narrowly escaped an encounter with a score or more of those venomous and pugnacious creatures.

Rupert glanced at her. "You remember that evening, Nora—the night before Snowflake was lost—when you came out to help me round up the cattle that got away from me, on the east range?"

"Yes."

"Well, I didn't tell you so, but I had promised those cowboys who helped us, before you came, that I would go over to the 7-H Ranch the next night. I was crazy to hear De Vargas, father"—he turned to his father, a note of appeal in his voice: "I don't know how I am going to ask you to forgive me for what I did, and I reckon you won't feel much like it when you know

it all. It seems to me as if I must have taken leave of my senses about that time. I have been so cowardly, I've acted so many lies—if I haven't told them outright—that I feel like a sneaking whelp, and—I guess I am one."

"Go on," commanded Mr. Carrol, briefly.

"I asked you to let me go, father, but I didn't think you would; and I knew it wasn't right to ask it when you were hurt and suffering, but—I was going—and I started, anyway. I waited until you were all asleep, then I went out to the barn; I had not intended to take Snowflake at first, but Vidette seemed so tired that I was ashamed to take her out again, and Snowflake was begging to go. It was hard work to hold her after we got out on to the plains; she went like a shot. You remember that short-cut around the head of the mesa to the 7-H? I meant to take that; I thought I had taken it, and it's so smooth—till you pass Dry Creek—that it's safe riding, so I let her have her head, although it was dark. But I went too far south; instead of rounding the mesa, I was riding along its upper end; you know how it drops down on the north, all at once, for nearly twelve feet. I didn't see where we were, and Snowflake didn't, either, until all of a sudden she tried to stop; she did stop, so quick that I was shot off, clean over her head, but she was too late to save herself. I kept on going, slipping and sliding to the bottom of the slope, and I heard Snowflake crashing after me. I had time to think, as we both went down, what if she should fall on top of me! But she didn't. I wish she had. When we both reached the bottom she lay at arm's length from me; I was not hurt at all. I got up and looked at her, lying huddled up in a heap at my feet. If she had been a little scrub broncho," Rupert interpolated bitterly, "she would have jumped up without a scratch, but it was Snowflake, and so—and so"—Rupert's voice shook; he concluded, huskily—"she didn't get up. It was a long time before I would believe that she couldn't. I patted and coaxed and called—she did not stir. I didn't go near her head at first; I was afraid—afraid that I should find out that she was dead. When I did force myself to lift her head I saw that the thing that I had been afraid of had happened. Her neck was broken."

Rupert paused to get control of his voice, and his father, with his face turned away, looked steadfastly out of the window. His face was still and grave, but no longer angry. Perhaps he saw a terrified, conscience-smitten boy—his only son—kneeling alone in the wide night of the plains, beside the beautiful, motionless creature who, but a moment before, had been carrying him, wild and free as the wind. And she was dead. Poor Rupert!

"I meant to tell you, father, just as quick as I got home; I meant to awake you, if you were asleep, so that I need not lose a minute, but—when I got here, I—I grew afraid. The moon had come up long before I got home, and there was a mist, and when I came upon a band of cattle they would start away from me and stare and snort. I knew it was just because they were not used to seeing anyone on foot, and yet it made me feel as if they knew what I had done—as if everything was avoiding me. I knew that the straightforward course was best. I have known it all along. I—I—haven't enjoyed deceiving you, father," Rupert went on, brokenly, "but I didn't seem to have will-power enough to bring myself to tell you. I thought, along at first, when you were inquiring around and offering rewards for Snowflake's recovery, that it would be easier to run away from the trouble than to face it. I thought that, since I wasn't a very good hand on the range—and, I don't suppose, ever will be—you'd be fully as well satisfied if I went, and it wouldn't cost you any more to pay a good hand than it does to get things out of the tangle that I'm always getting them into. I should

have gone, then, but for Nora; she suspected what I had done and what I meant to do."

Mr. Carrol withdrew his eyes from the contemplation of the landscape outside the window to glance inquiringly at his daughter, who answered the look with a slight affirmative nod.

"Nora begged me to stay," Rupert went on, "and, father, I am so hard, and so unfeeling, that I held out. I wouldn't promise her not to leave home until she went down on her knees to ask it of me."

Here Mrs. Easton had a momentary recourse to the gingham apron, while, with an incoherent reference to Mr. Watts, she murmured:

"'On your knees, fair saint, to me?
Not so, not so! Arise, lest the avenging
angel's pen,
Dipped in thy tears, shall trace anew the
record of my sins!'"

"Grandma!" murmured Nora, imploringly.

Rupert continued: "I promised, and I stayed. It wasn't easy to do, father, because every day that I put off my confession made matters so much the worse. The other day—yesterday—Cosme found Snowflake's body, and beside it my silver birthday pin, where it had fallen when we rolled down the cliff. Cosme seems to have suspected me, all along, and it was easy enough for him to see how matters stood after that. When he told me what he had found, and what he suspected, I made up my mind that I would go. I would go, if I broke promises piled sky-high."

"Why didn't Cosme come to me? Why didn't he tell me that he had found her?" asked Mr. Carrol.

"I was going to tell you that. It seems that he has got into trouble of some kind with *his* father. He didn't say what it was, but his father had ordered him to show up at the old Valdez cabin, last night, and take a good threshing. I reckon old Valdez don't spare the lash when he gets after Cosme. This time he had promised to use cane cactus branches, and—well, Cosme threatened to come on you for the reward for finding Snowflake—he said that you didn't say she'd got to be alive—if I didn't go down to the cabin, when it got too dark for his father to distinguish between us, and take the whipping in his place. To keep him quiet—until I could get away—I promised. I intended to go straight away without coming into the house, but there was a man here, and I waited for him to be gone. Nora overheard Cosme and me talking; she hunted me up; she tried to make me promise again that I wouldn't leave. I wouldn't promise her not to go away until she said that she had a plan—oh, father, you will be ashamed to hear me say it—she said that she was sure that she could persuade old Valdez to agree to let Cosme off, and, at the same time, not to speak of the matter to him—to just let the whole thing drop, as if it had never come up at all. And I was so worn out that I consented to stay and let her try it. Her plan succeeded; it wasn't until she told you this morning that she knew where the Jersey was that I had the least idea what it had been. When she said that, I knew—Valdez has always wanted Daisy. I was just as sure that Nora had turned her over to him, as the price of his silence, this morning, as I was this afternoon when I rode past his corral and saw her there."

"How is that, Nora?" Mr. Carrol asked, as Rupert ceased.

"It's right," Nora confessed, hurriedly. "Mr. Valdez agreed not to tell how he came by her; he was to send anyone asking him, to me."

For so hot-tempered a man, Mr. Carrol controlled himself remarkably well. He sat for some moments after Rupert's story was concluded, with his elbows on his knees and his fingers interlaced, apparently lost in thought. The other occupants of the room were equally silent. Rupert was inwardly

bracing himself to receive sentence, but feeling glad for all that—glad to his very finger-tips—that he had confessed, that he was no longer a sneaking culprit. Being a culprit, simply, seemed to one of his disposition far less terrible than to be compelled to recognize himself a sneaking one.

"We seem, as near as I can make out, to have been carrying on considerable of a game of cross purposes," Mr. Carrol at length observed, looking up at Rupert, frankly. "You'll be surprised, son, that—well, that I haven't been quite blind, myself. You are an honest lad, still it seems that your sister and Cosme both suspected just about what did occur; it's rather odd, seems to me, that none of you should have thought of crediting me with wits as bright as theirs. You were very anxious to hear that fiddler, we all knew that. I got to thinking things over a day or two after Snowflake disappeared, and I seemed to receive quite a bit of light on the subject; maybe I got the more light because even laudanum won't always keep a man who is in pain asleep all night. I was awake when you crept into the house along toward daylight. I had heard the barn door shut—when you put away my saddle, I suppose—before you came in. It was so hard to believe that you would do such a thing, that you would try to deceive me, though, Rupert, that I did not connect these two circumstances and your evident misery with the fact of Snowflake's disappearance, until I happened to glance out of my window and saw Nora frantically shaking my saddle blankets. She did not get off all the white hairs, as I found later on examination, and I had not ridden Snowflake for a number of days; I had used the blanket on the bay, and I knew that those white hairs were fresh. It was easy, too easy, to imagine what was in your mind, and the course that you would probably take. As to Cosme's claiming the reward, he could no more do it than Valdez can keep Daisy. One of the boys from the Cimarron found where Snowflake was lying, the other day, and called last night to tell me. I said nothing about it, for I wanted you to own up what you had done, like a man, Rupert. A blind man could have seen how you were suffering, and I was terribly afraid that, in your desperation, you would give us the slip. I meant to hunt you up, hot-foot, if you did leave. Sometimes—often," he continued, thoughtfully, "there comes a moral crisis in a boy's life—a moral crisis. I knew that such an one had come to you. It seemed to me best, for your future strength, that you should struggle through with it alone. It seems that you couldn't quite conquer the evil impulses unaided, and there's where your sister's love has proved itself wiser than my theorizing.

"Of course I did not know just what part the heifer's sudden disappearance and Nora's refusal to explain it had to do with your struggle, but I knew that, since Nora could not, all at once, have changed her nature, it had something to do with it. Things were looking so dark that I concluded it was time to use a little vicarious coercion, if you'll excuse such a dictionary expression. I thought that if nothing else would bring you to your senses, harshness toward your sister, who was suffering for your sake, might do it."

"You seem to be a pretty good judge of character," Rupert remarked, with a rueful smile.

"Yes, in this case, at least. You see, I'd been making a study of it, and I'd about decided that if you could endure to see her unjustly punished, you could endure almost anything. But if Nora had been less heroic, if she had told us all about her remarkable trade, that scheme would have failed, too. Eleanor, my little girl, come here and give your cross old father a kiss."

CHAPTER XXV.

Conclusion.

"IT HAS hurt me all along, Rupert," Mr. Carrol said—when Nora had complied, and had taken the opportunity to whisper: "Please don't be hard on Rupert, father. He has suffered so much!" —"to see, as I could not help doing, that you believed that it was alone the loss of the mare that grieved me, and it cut deeper and deeper the longer you persisted in your attempt to deceive me. Well—let that all pass. We'll begin again, all 'round. I've been a good deal to blame in one way, myself. I'm naturally close-mouthed and hot-tempered. I feel sure, now, that it would have been far better if I had early formed the habit of taking you a little more into my confidence, and I am going to do so now to the extent of saying that I believe, with Nora, that you have suffered enough. I shall not attempt to inflict any further punishment on you, Rupert, for you have, unfortunately, punished yourself severely—severely. Rupert, I told you that I intended to sell Snowflake. I also intended to use the money so obtained in sending you away to school. Why should you have thought, because it is a fact that I cannot well endure the sort of music that folks drag out of a fiddle, that I was cruel and unfeeling? Have I ever objected to your having a fiddle? I have only insisted that you should not allow it to take your mind from your work; there was, to me, a great reason why your work should be well done, why we should be very saving of our time and of our money. I've seen, all along, that you had a great talent for that peculiar kind of business. You get it from your grandmother's—my mother's—folks. I believe in cultivating whatever talent anyone has, if so be it isn't a bad one. I promised myself that this fall you should go down to Santa Fé to school, as you have so long wished, and that the price of Snowflake should help to pay your way and to pay for music lessons. I wish, now, that I had told you of it. It would have made your life pleasanter."

And that was all that Mr. Carrol had to say about it; he was never known to refer to the subject of Rupert's escapade again, and when curious visitors inquired as to Snowflake's fate, his answer was, "She accidentally fell over a cliff and was killed." But, on that same day, he had called Cosme to him and instructed him to go over to his father's and drive home the Jersey heifer that he would find in his father's corral.

Great was the young Mexican's surprise on hearing this—so great, that he so far departed from his usual habits as to venture some halting surmises as to how the heifer came there. "Yo' s'posen, now, 'at 'at Daisy, she jump corral an' git in like 'at?" he asked.

"It may be," responded his employer, coolly. "It's like enough that that 'stariff' you was speaking of a few days ago got after her, and she jumped in there for safety. Anyway, you go and get her out."

Cosme, who understood that he was being made sport of, obeyed less amiably than usual. He had a suspicion, for which he could seem to find no grounds, that the fact of the Jersey's being in his father's corral had something to do with the whipping that Rupert was to have taken in his stead. Did he take it? Cosme never knew.

Valdez, senior, on returning home and finding that the coveted Jersey had been reclaimed by Mr. Carrol, bore the loss philosophically. Privately, he had had his doubts, from the first, as to the legality of the transaction that turned her over to him. He assured Mr. Carrol that he bore him no ill-will, but added pathetically: "I promise Señorita Nora not to w'ip Cosme; fool, me. I got Cosme's soul on my han' for be save. How I goin' save it, if I no w'ip for bad habit?"

"You've whipped him too much already,"

Mr. Carrol declared; and added, from the wisdom of his new experience, "Try making a friend of him. That's better than coercion."

"Me? I knows nuttin' 'bout 'at coussin; maybe 'at good for w'ite boy. I goin' lick Cosme good nex' chance I git."

And Valdez kept his word to the letter.

A year afterward, when Rupert went away to school, the little family left behind saw him go with proud and thankful hearts. He had earned the right to go, and to be trusted. Nora, standing beside the road in front of the house, watched the stage that carried him until it became a mere vanishing speck in the distance, then she looked off and away over the far plains, and the purple mountains that uprose before her, silent, changeless friends. It was early morning, and here and there, from warm hillside or hidden mountain valley, blue pennons of smoke were curling lazily upward—smoke that rose, as she knew, from lonely little cabins, from remote cattle camps, the fixed and the migratory homes of both white and Mexican ranchers and herdsmen; and, gazing on the uplifting panorama, if there was any pain in her heart because of the chances that she herself had missed, Nora resolutely stifled it. Rupert's feet were set in the right way at last, and the future—her intuition, the clear vision of love, told her—held great prizes for him, and the best prize of all, as she saw it, and as it came to pass, was that her brother came to be recognized not only as a trustworthy man, but as a power for good wherever his lot was cast.

THE END.

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